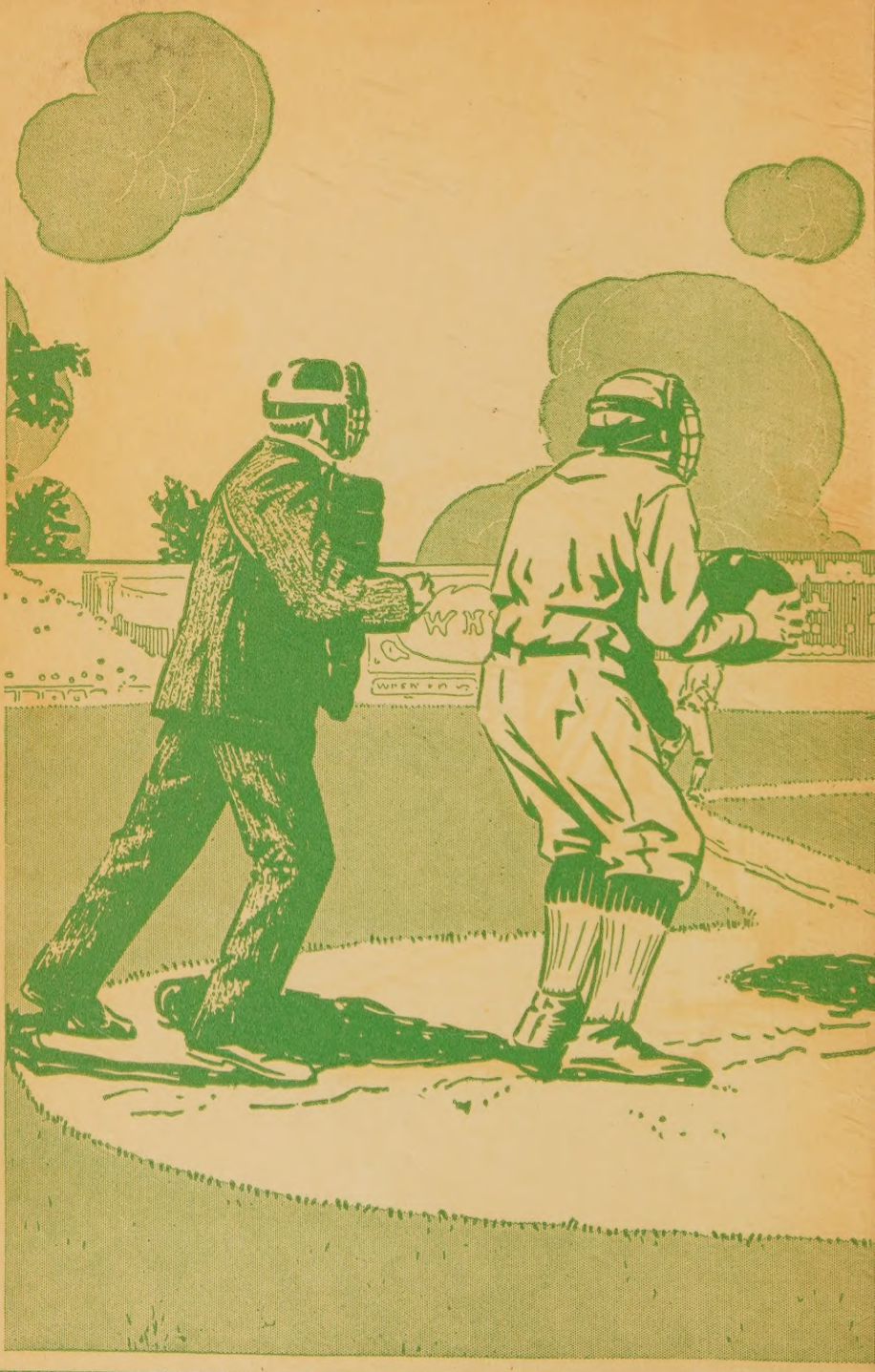
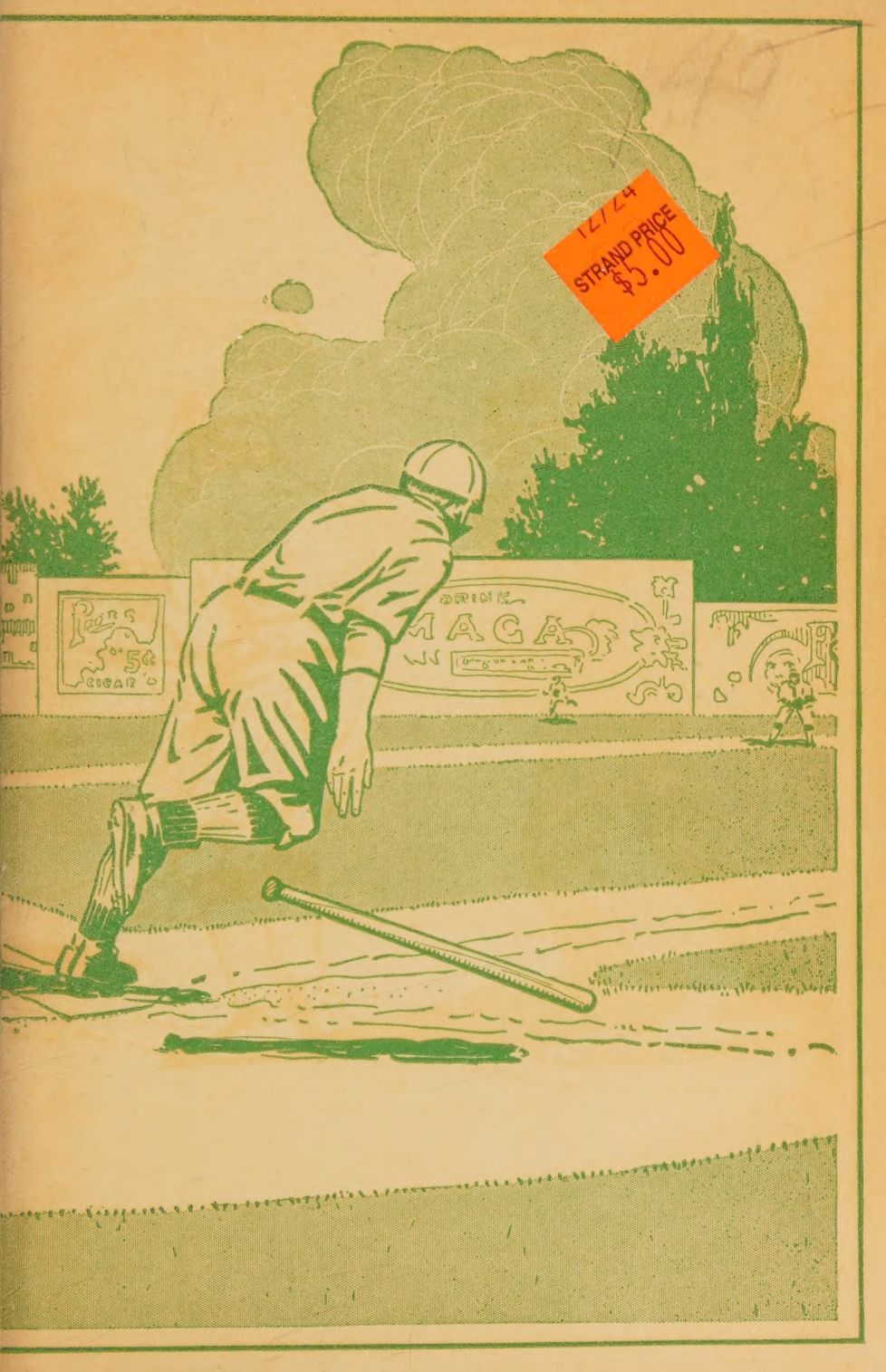
LEFTY O' the BIG LEAGUE

BURT L. STANDISH

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LEFTY O' THE BIG LEAGUE

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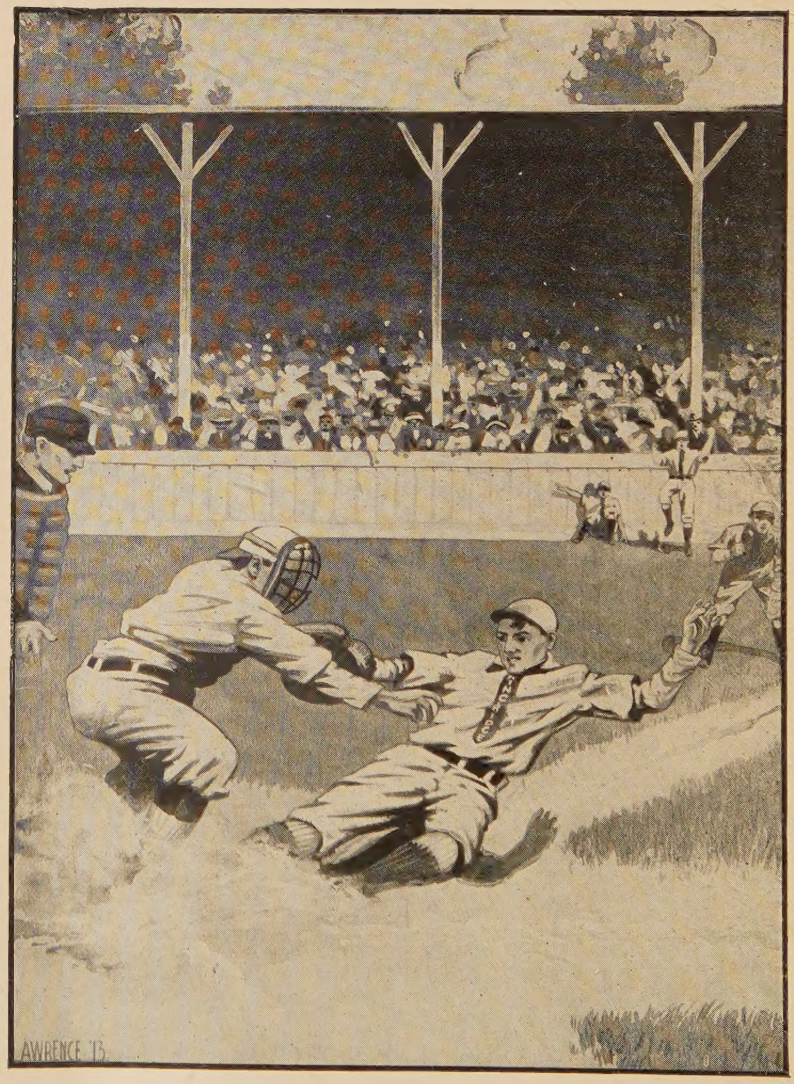
To Billy Jack
From
Jack Clist
Xmas 1933



SPIKES FIRST, LOCKE SLID.

Frontispiece (Page 285)

LEFTY O' THE BIG LEAGUE

by

BURT L. STANDISH

LEFTY O' THE BUSH
LEFTY O' THE BIG LEAGUE
LEFTY O' THE BLUE STOCKINGS
LEFTY O' THE TRAINING CAMP

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers* NEW YORK

LEFTY O' THE BUSH

BY

BURT L. STANDISH
Author of "Lefty o' the Big League," Lefty o' the Blue Stockings," "Lefty o' the Training Camp."

ILLUSTRATED

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PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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LEFTY O' THE BUSH

CHAPTER I

OUT IN THE BUSH

AFTER running his eye over the Kingsbridge batting order, Mike Riley, manager of the Bancroft "Bullies," rolled the black cigar well into the corner of his mouth, lifted himself ponderously to his feet, and walked across toward the bench of the home team.

Kingsbridge had taken the field for practice, the visitors having warmed up already. The Northern League, a genuine "bush" organization, had opened two days earlier in Bancroft and Fryeburg, but this was to be the first game of the season in Kingsbridge, a hustling, crude, though ambitious pulp-mill town.

As it was Saturday afternoon, when the mills closed down at three o'clock, there was certain to be a big crowd in attendance, double assurance of which could be seen in the rapidly filling grand stand and bleachers, and the steady stream of humanity pouring in through the gates.

As Riley approached, a lean, sallow man, with a hawk-beak nose, rose from the home bench and nodded, holding out a bony hand, which, cold as a dead fish, was almost smothered in the pudgy paw put forth to meet it.

"Hello, Hutch!" gurgled the manager of the Bullies, with a show of cordiality, although he quickly dropped the chilling hand. "How's tricks? See you took a fall outer Fryeburg yistidday."

"Yes, we got away with it," answered the local manager, in a monotonous, dead-level voice, lacking wholly in enthusiasm. "But the 'Brownies' are a cinch; nothing but a bunch of raw kids."

"Uh-huh!" grunted Riley, twisting his thumb into the huge watch chain which spanned the breadth of his bulging waistcoat; "that's right. Still, you didn't have much leeway to spare, did ye?"

"Put it over by one measly run, that's all. Deever's arm went on the blink in the seventh, and the greenhorns came near hammering out a win. Locke managed to hold 'em."

"Who is this Locke? I see he's down to wing 'em for you to-day. Where'd you find him, huh?"

"Don't ask me who he is. I never heard of

him before. He's some green dub of a port-side flinger old man Cope picked up. You know Cope used to play the game back in the days of the Deluge, and he thinks he knows all about it. As he's chairman of the Kingsbridge Baseball Association, and one of the heaviest backers of the team, folks round here let him meddle enough to keep him appeased. All the same, long as they've hired me to manage, I'm going to manage, after I've shown 'em how much Cope don't know about it."

"That's the talk, Hutch," chuckled the Bancroft manager. "You've got some team, and you oughter be able to make it interestin' for the rest of us, if the rubes let you have your swing. It was that old fox, Cope, who got Deever away from me arter I had Pat as good as signed, which makes me feel a bit raw, natural. Outside of Deever, and Locke, and a few others, I s'pose the team's practically your make-up?"

"Then you've got another guess coming," returned Bob Hutchinson. "Skillings, Lace, Crandall, and Hickey make the whole of my picking; Cope practically got together the rest of the bunch. But wait; some of 'em won't hold their jobs long, between you and me, Mike.

"Perhaps we hadn't better chin any longer, for

I see we're being watched, and the people of this town are so hot against Bancroft, and you in particular, that they might get suspicious, and think there was something crooked doing if we talked too long."

"Guess that's right," admitted Riley. "They ain't got no love for me in Kingsbridge, 'count of our rubbing it inter them last year. Makes me laugh, the way they squealed. They were so sore they swore they'd have a team to beat us this year at any cost. That's how you got your job; they decided to have a reg'ler manager, who could give all his time and attention to handlin' the team. Sorry for you, Hutch, but if they beat Bancroft under the wire with the bunch they've scraped together, I'll quit the game for good. So long."

Having learned that Hutchinson was not wholly responsible for the make-up of the Kingsbridge nine, Riley did not hesitate to express himself in this manner, thus betraying the disdain in which he really held his opponents of the day.

Only once since the organization of the so-called Northern League, which really had very little organization whatever, being run, like many small, back-country "leagues," in a loose, hit-or-miss fashion—only once had Bancroft failed to win

the championship; and that year Riley, a minor leaguer before age and avoirdupois had deposited him in the can, had not handled the club.

Bancroft was a city, and it cut her fans deeply to be downed on the diamond by a smaller place, besides severely wounding in their pockets some of the sports who had wagered real money. Hence the former successful manager was called back to the job, at which he was always prepared to make good through any means available.

Kingsbridge had entered the league the previous season, filling the place of a town that, loaded with baseball debts, and discouraged by poor success, had dropped out. Owing its existence to Cyrus King, lumberman and pulp manufacturer, Kingsbridge was barely four years old, yet its inhabitants already numbered nearly five thousand.

Furthermore, it was confidently looking forward to the time, believed to be not far distant, when it should outstrip the already envious city of Bancroft, and become the "metropolis" of that particular region.

While pretending to scoff at the "mushroom village," Bancroft was secretly disturbed and worried, fearing the day when Kingsbridge, through the enterprise of its citizens, the interest

and power of its founder, and the coming of a second railroad, which was seeking a charter, would really forge to the front, and leave the "big town down the river" in the lurch. Therefore, quite naturally, the rivalry between the two places was intense in other things besides baseball.

There is nothing like the game, however, to bring to the surface the jealousies and rivalries existing between towns having contending teams; something about the game is certain to tear open old sores and stir up ancient animosities apparently long forgotten.

Especially is this true in minor leagues and "out in the bush," where not infrequently it appears to the chance stranger that whole towns—men, women, and children—have gone baseball crazy.

It is in such places that one may see the game, as a game, at its best—and its worst. Here victory or defeat assumes a tragic importance that must seem laughable to the ordinary city fan; the former being frequently the cause of rejoicing and celebrating, sometimes with fireworks and brass bands, while the latter will cast over the community a cloud of gloom which could be equaled only by an appalling catastrophe.

This intensity of feeling and emotion may

scarcely be understood by a person who has never followed with individual interest the fortunes of a backwoods team, tasting the sweet intoxication of triumph, hard earned and contested to the last ditch, or the heartbreaking bitterness of defeat and shattered hopes.

CHAPTER II

UNDER COVER

KINGSBRIDGE, with its pulp-mill and saw-mill laborers, was precisely the sort of a place to back a team to the limit, and to demand a winning club, regardless of expense.

On Saturdays, because of the early shutting down of the mills, nearly all the laborers could get out to witness the contests, and few there were who failed to attend, unless sickness or imperative necessity kept them away. In fact, on the last day of the week, the attendance in that town was as large as the average turnout in Bancroft.

The mill town's initial experience had been most unsatisfactory and discouraging. Starting out with a nine made up of youngsters, among whom were college men and high-school boys, it had made a promising beginning, actually standing at the head of the league for almost three weeks, and then fighting Bancroft for first place for an equal length of time.

But the youngsters did not seem to have staying qualities, and this, combined with poor man-

agement and the "fair-or-foul" methods of the Bullies, had eventually sent Kingsbridge down the ladder to finish the season at the very foot of the list.

This failure, however, simply aroused the town to grim determination, bringing about the organization of a baseball association which included many of the leading citizens, Henry Cope, who kept the largest general store in town, being chosen chairman. The association pledged itself to put a winning team on to the field, and Cope, having considerable knowledge of baseball and players, set to work in midwinter preparing for the coming campaign. He was given a comparatively free hand by his associates, although, in order that Bancroft might not hear and get wise, the purpose of his movements was kept secret until it was almost time for the league to open.

Then it became known that Bob Hutchinson, a manager who had handled teams in one of the well known minor leagues, had been secured to take charge of the "Kinks." It was also made public that a team of fast and experienced players throughout had been signed, and the names of several of these players were printed in the sporting column of the Bancroft *News*.

Hope flamed high in Kingsbridge. The topic

of the street corners was baseball. It was freely proclaimed that the town was prepared to take a heavy fall out of Bancroft, and would begin by downing the "hated enemy" in the very first clash, which was scheduled to occur in the down-river city.

Of course a few pessimistic killjoys, of whom every community must have its quota, scoffed at the efforts and expectations of the enthusiasts, declaring it was not possible for a place no larger than Kingsbridge, no matter how earnestly it might try, to defeat a city with Bancroft's record and resources. These croakers were not popular, yet their gloomy prophecies awakened misgivings in many a heart.

In Bancroft the midwinter silence of Kingsbridge had aroused some alarm lest the mill town, troubled with cold feet, should fail to come to the scratch when the season opened, which would make it necessary to lure some other place into the fold, or run the league three-cornered, something most unpleasant and undesirable.

Even when Kingsbridge sent a representative to attend the usual annual meeting of the league association, the quiet declination of that representative to give out any particulars concerning the personnel of the up-river team had left a feel-

ing of uneasiness, despite his repeated assurance that there would be such a team.

Later, on the appearance of the newspaper report that Kingsbridge had engaged Bob Hutchinson as manager, and the publication of an incomplete roster of the mill-town players, Bancroft's relief and satisfaction had been tempered by alarm of a different nature. For it now became apparent that the city's ambitious rival had all along been quietly at work preparing to spring a surprise in the form of an unusually strong nine that would make the other clubs go some, right from the call of "play."

Mike Riley had not sought to allay this final feeling of apprehension; on the contrary, for purely personal reasons, he fostered it. For would it not encourage the backers of his team, believing as they did in his sound baseball sense, to give him even greater liberty in management? And when he should again win the championship, as he secretly and egotistically felt certain of doing, the luster of the accomplishment must seem far more dazzling than usual.

After Bancroft's opening-day success, when she had rubbed it into the Kinks to the tune of 8 to 4, Riley became completely satisfied that the Kingsbridge nine was a false alarm.

Aware of Hutchinson's particular weaknesses, he had never really feared the man; but let this much be said to Riley's credit: whenever possible, he preferred to capture victory by the skill and fighting ability of his team, rather than through secret deals and shady, underhanded methods. And he always developed a team of aggressive, browbeating fighters; hence the far-from-pleasing appellation of "Bullies."

In her second game, Kingsbridge's victory over Fryeburg had come as a surprise to Manager Riley, whose judgment had led him to believe that the Brownies would also open the season with a triumph on their own field. Hence his desire to question Hutchinson about it.

Tom Locke, the new pitcher who had relieved Pat Deever when the Fryeburgers took Deever's measure in the seventh, was an unknown to Riley, and, the chap being slated to go against Bancroft this day, Mike had sought information concerning him.

Hutchinson, however, could tell him nothing save that the young man had been signed by Henry Cope; but, holding Cope's baseball judgment openly in contempt, this seemed sufficiently relieving, and, complacently chewing his black cigar, he confidently returned to the Bancroft bench.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN TO PITCH

TO the left of the bench, which was set well back against the railing in front of the third-base bleachers, on which a carload of Bancroft fans were bunched, Jock Hoover, the star slabman of the team, was warming up with Bingo Bangs, the catcher.

Hoover, speedy, pugnacious, with an arm of iron, the face of a Caliban, and the truculence of an Attila, was well calculated to inspire respect and fear when on the mound; and his mid-season acquirement by Bancroft the year before had doubtless fixed that team in first position, and marked the assured downfall of Kingsbridge, against whom he was most frequently worked.

In Bancroft, Hoover was admired and toadied; in Kingsbridge he was most cordially hated. More than once his intimidating methods on the latter field had come perilously close to producing a riot, which, had it ever started among the mill men, must have been a nasty affair.

Never in the most threatening moments of the

rough crowd's clamoring, however, had Hoover turned a hair. Always through it all he had sneered and grinned contemptuously, apparently inviting assault, and showing disappointment when the better element among the crowd, who cared for the sport as a sport, and knew the harm to the game that a pitched battle must bring, succeeded in holding the hot-headed and reckless ones in check.

Biting off the end of his cigar, Riley stood watching Hoover meditatively. Out on the field the locals were getting in the last snappy bit of preliminary practice, and the game would begin in a few minutes. The manager's eyes had left Hoover and sought "Butch" Prawley, one of the other two pitchers, when a hand touched his arm, and some one spoke to him. Rolling his head toward his shoulder, he saw "Fancy" Dyke standing on the other side of the rail.

Francis Dyke, a young sporting man of Bancroft, was one of the backers of the team. To him a baseball game on which he had not placed a wager worth while was necessarily slow and uninteresting, even though well fought and contested to the finish. Son of a horseman who had won and lost big sums on the turf, Fancy, apparently inheriting the gaming instinct, had turned to base-

ball with the decline of racing. His nickname came through his taste for flashy clothes.

"Don't you do it," said Dyke, vapory bits of bluish cigarette smoke curling from his thin lips as he spoke.

"Do what?" grunted Riley in surprise.

"Run in Prawley. You were thinking of letting Hoover squat on the bench."

"How'd you know that?" asked the manager, still more surprised.

"Saw it on your face."

"If my mug gives me away in that fashion, I'll trade it for another," growled Mike, in displeasure. "But why not pitch Prawley? He can swaller that bunch, one after another, without greasin'. This is our first game here, and Jock ain't so pop'ler in this town."

"What do you care about that? It's our first game here, and we want it, to hold first place. If they should happen to trim us to-day, they'd have us tied."

With the mutilated and lifeless cigar gripped in his coarse teeth, Riley pulled down the corners of his big mouth disdainfully. "Trim us—with that bunch of scrubs and has-beens! Why, they couldn't do it if I went in and pitched myself."

"Take it from me, 'tain't wise to be so cock-

sure. I've been watching their new pitcher warm up. He's a southpaw."

"And a green one from the scrub pastures somewhere. The boys will send him to the stable in about three innin's."

"Perhaps. But I walked over in range while he was limbering his flinger, and he's got a few good benders, not to mention some speed. You don't want to forget that we've got five left-hand batters, and a southpaw that can really pitch may bother 'em some. I reckon that's just why they've raked in this feller Locke."

"Don't you b'lieve it. Just spoke to Hutch about him, and Hutch don't know no more'n you or me. Old Cope signed Locke and the most of the team, and he'd never figger on a lefty worryin' us because we've got so many left-hand hitters."

"That," persisted Dyke, "don't alter the conditions any. This Locke stopped Fryeburg after they blanketed Deever, and Kingsbridge wants this game to-day—*bad*. I've heard some of the Bridgers talkin', and they're plenty confident, thinking they've got a wiz in this southpaw kid.

"To-morrow's Sunday, and Hoover can rest," he added. "He's hard as nails, and you won't

hurt him, even if you have to use him again Monday. Always play the game safe when you can—that's my motto. I'll take chances, all right, if I have to, but I've never yet let my conscience fret me into ducking a bet on a sure thing. Hoover is the Kinks' hoodoo, and it ought to be pretty safe with him handing 'em."

"Safe," gurgled Riley, highly amused. "I should guess yes. They think they've got some players, but, with Hutchinson furnishin' only four out of the 'leven men they have, as he told me, and Cope diggin' up the rest, most of 'em holdovers from last year, it's a joke.

"Why, I let old Cope have Pat Deever, though he thinks he got Deever away from me. Just as I was about to close with Pat, I got it straight that he'd put his wing on the blink for fair, and, by pretendin' I was hot after Deever all the time, I helped him make a fancy deal with Cope.

"Pat was batted out by the Brownies after fooling 'em along to the seventh with a slow ball that made him sweat drops of blood ev'ry time he boosted it over the pan; but he's foxy, and he'll manage to hang on by bluffing 'em that his arm'll come round soon, see if he don't," added Riley. "The only pitcher they've got is Skillings, and

even he's frappéd his wing, pitchin' the drop all the time, which he has to, as he's a mark when he lets up on it."

"You're manager," said Fancy, "and I'm not trying to show you; but I hope you'll play safe by sending Hoover out to start with. If it proves so easy, you can pull him out when you see the game is clinched."

"All right. Jock's name is on the battin' order, and I'll let him start her off."

CHAPTER IV

THE PARSON'S DAUGHTER

DYKE expressed satisfaction, and the hazelnut sparkler in his blazing red tie reflected varicolored gleams from its many facets, as his cupped hands held a burning match to light a fresh cigarette.

As he flung aside the match, and chanced to glance past the far end of the bleachers, his black eyes glinted on beholding a girl in a light dress, shading herself with a pale-blue parasol, and seated in a carriage that had just drawn up in line with others out there. A span of spirited and extremely restless bays were attached to the carriage. At the girl's side, wearing a light suit, straw hat, and tan driving gloves, sat a square-shouldered young man.

"Hel-lo!" breathed Fancy. "There's old man King's cub, with the parson's daughter. I don't blame him, for she certainly is some peach. She must be getting independent; last year I offered to get her a season ticket, but she said her hidebound old man wouldn't let her come to the games, which

he considered sinful and poisonous to the morals of the community."

"Huh!" grunted Riley, eyeing the girl in the carriage. "She's a year older now, and mebbe she's given the old pulpit pounder notice that she proposes henceforth to do about as she pleases. I've heard she's ruther high-strung and lively."

"Well, she's taking a chance with Bent King, 'cording to his college record. He cut it out so hot that he was fired the second year, and then his old man, feeling somewhat peeved, set him to work in the big mill here. Now the brat's foreman of the mill, though I reckon it was his father that put him there over better men, and not his ability."

"Oh, you're jealous," chuckled the manager. "She turned you down when you tried to git gay, that's what's the matter. You oughter considered, Fancy, that your record was agin' ye, and that you was known by reputation in Kingsbridge, just as well as in Bancroft. I've noticed the right sorter gals don't travel in your society extensively."

Dyke's thin cheek took on a faint flush, and he gnawed with his sharp white teeth one corner of his close-cropped, small black mustache.

"I reckon she'd be as safe with me as with Bent

King," he retorted. "Of course, I know what her old man would think of me; but in these days girls don't tell their folks about every man they're friendly with."

"There's old Cope speakin' to her now," said Riley. "Looket him take the cover off that skatin' rink of his. There's real swagger gallantry for ye, Flash."

A stout, red-faced, jolly-looking man in a somewhat soiled snuff-colored suit had paused beside the carriage to lift his hat and speak to the girl, who greeted him with a charming smile and a show of fetching dimples.

"Howdy-do, Janet," said the man on the ground. "I'm s'prised to see you here, though I b'lieve you did tell me you was crazy over baseball. Your father's so set agin' it that I didn't s'pose he'd let you come. Howdy-do, Benton. Fine day for the opening."

"Oh, father is as bad as ever," laughed the girl; "but I told Bent how much I wanted to come, and he drove round and used his persuasion with daddy, who finally consented, after getting a promise that I would sit in the carriage and not step out of it. It was jolly nice of Benton, for I *am* crazy over the game, and I'd go to see one every day if I could."

She was fresh and girlish and unaffected, yet, somehow, she did not give one the impression of crudity and silliness so often shown by a vivacious, blue-eyed blonde. Although very pretty, she was not doll-like, and one who studied her mobile, changeful face would soon discover there, as well as in her voice and manner, unmistakable signs of good breeding and character. Her eyes were unusual; one could not look into their depths without feeling irresistibly attracted toward her.

The young man at her side, a well-set-up chap a trifle above medium height, was the only son of Cyrus King. He was not more than twenty-four, and had a somewhat cynical, haughty face, with a pair of flashing dark eyes and petulant mouth. Nevertheless, when he laughed, which he did quite frequently, he was attractive, almost handsome.

"Yes, Cope," he nodded, as the older man brought forth a handkerchief and mopped his perspiring bald head; "it certainly is a good day for the opening, and there's a cracking crowd out to see it. They're beginning to overflow the seats. Suppose we have any show at all to win?"

"Hey?" cried the chairman of the baseball association. "Any show to win? You bet we have! We're *goin'* to win. We've got to have this first game at home."

"But we're up against Bancroft, and I see Jock Hoover has just finished warming up to pitch for them."

"That'll jest make it all the more interestin'. We've got a pitcher, too, I want you to know. I signed him myself, and he'll make 'em set up and take notice. You jest watch Tom Locke when he goes inter the box."

"I've heard something about him. Who is he? And where did you get him?"

Running the handkerchief round the sweatband inside his soiled straw hat, Henry Cope winked shrewdly, and covered his shining dome.

"Why, didn't I tell ye his name is Tom Locke? Never mind where I picked him up. He's got the goods, and he'll deliver 'em. If he don't jest naturally make them Bullies break their backs poundin' empty air to-day, I'll be the most s'prised man in the county."

"Oh, I hope he *is* good!" exclaimed the girl. "Everybody in town was disappointed over the way Bancroft beat us last year. They all said we needed one corking good pitcher to put up against Bancroft's best man."

"We've got him," assured Henry Cope. "We've got the very feller in this here Locke. You watch and see."

"There goes the umpire," said King. "They are going to start the game."

"Excuse me," said Cope hastily. "I think I'll git over by our bench, where I can watch Locke work. That's him—that tall, slim chap goin' inter the box now. Jest keep your eye on him. So long."

He hurried away as the umpire called "play" and Bancroft's first batter rose and trotted out from the bench.

CHAPTER V

A BAD BEGINNING

A YELL rose from the crowd which now almost completely encircled the field. It was not a cheer, such as may sometimes be heard at the beginning of a Big League game; it was a sudden, sharp, nerve-shocking combination of bellow and shriek, primitive in its methodless manner of expressing joyous satisfaction and elation that the moment had arrived for the contest to begin. Thus may have a gathering of primordial mankind, assembled to witness some sort of sanguinary gladiatorial contest, voiced its fierce emotion at the sight of trained warriors charging upon one another in the arena.

This burst of sound died away in a few scattering whoops and yelps as the umpire, body protector adjusted, mask held ready, lifted his hand for silence.

"Game t'-day," he shouted hoarsely, "Bancrof' ag'inst Kingsbridge. Bat'ry f'r Kingsbridge, Locke 'n' Oulds; bat'ry f'r Bancroft, Hoover 'n' Bangs. Pla-a-ay ball-ll!"

"Ye-ee-ee!" shrieked the crowd, and then settled down to enjoy the struggle.

Bill Harney, clever sticker and captain of the Bancroft team, was ready at the plate. "Hunchy" Oulds, breastplated and masked, spat into the pocket of his catching mitt, rubbed the moisture about on the dented leather with his fingers, and then squatted behind the pan to signal. The umpire, celluloid recorder held behind his back, leaned forward on his toes to get a clear view over Oulds' head. Tom Locke toed the slab.

"Git th' fust one, boy!" roared a voice from the crowd. "Show what y' c'n do. Breeze him!"

The tall young man on the mound gave a shake of his head as he tossed back a lock of brown hair. His clean-cut face was a bit pale, and he seemed somewhat nervous, which was not strange, considering his apparent youth and the nature of the tumultuous, rough-and-ready crowd whose eyes were fastened upon him. He wore a glove on his right hand, and it was his cleat-tipped right shoe that touched the slab. Leaning forward, he nodded a bit as he caught the catcher's signal, swinging immediately into his delivery.

"Ball!" bellowed the umpire, as the sphere went shooting over, high and wide, a white streak in the air.

"Aw-w, get 'em down!" brayed the coacher back of first, while the one on the opposite side of the diamond whooped derisively, and the batter, having flung a glance skyward, grinned in a taunting way. "He ain't on stilts. He can't reach 'em in the clouds," added the coacher.

"Stiddy, boy," gurgled Oulds, returning the ball. "Make him hit."

That first wide one brought a mocking shout from the Bancroft bunch on the bleachers, and apparently Locke grew still more nervous, for his second pitch forced Harney to do a lively dodge to avoid being bored in the ribs.

"Ball tuh!"

"Wow-wow!" barked one coacher. "He's wild as mountain scenery."

"Take a ramble, Cap; he'll walk ye," cried the other coacher.

The Bancroft rooters scoffed again; the Kingsbridge crowd was anxiously silent.

"Never mind that, kid," soothed Oulds. "Take your time; don't hurry. Make him hit."

The backstop returning the ball, Locke attempted to catch it with his gloved hand, dropped

it, turned hastily, struck it with his toe, and sent it rolling toward second.

Larry Stark, covering that sack, sprang after the sphere, scooped it up, and held it in both hands against his chest while stepping swiftly toward the pitcher to speak a few low, reassuring words. Then he tossed the ball, and danced back to his position.

There was no doubt about it now; plainly Locke was nervous. Seeing this, the coachers and the visiting spectators did what they could to rattle him. Even though he tried to steady himself, the next ball from his fingers whiffed up a pop of dust two feet in front of the plate.

"Ball three!"

"The ascension begins early to-day," laughed the coacher near third; and the Bancrofters behind him began to sing: "Up in a Balloon. Boys."

On the home bench, Manager Hutchinson leaned forward, his elbow on his knee, his hand propping his chin, eyes narrowed and fixed on the disturbed pitcher.

Standing behind the bench, Henry Cope removed his old straw hat to mop his bald head and flushed face, trying all the while to preserve a calm and confident smile.

The crowd in the stand and along the right side of the field stirred restlessly. Murmurs were heard: "What's the matter with him?" "Punk!" "Rotten!" "He can't find the plate!" "He's no good!"

"Take your time, Locke," begged Captain Stark. "Don't hurry. Put it straight over, and let him hit. We're behind you."

Harney, sneering, twiddled his bat and made a bluff of turning his back to the plate. Although he did not turn, his indifferent pose spoke his disdain and belief that he would receive a pass.

The assurance was justified. Seeking to get a grip on himself, Tom Locke strove to whip over a straight one. Then—

"Take y'ur base!" croaked the umpire as the horsehide plunked into Oulds' reaching mitt.

CHAPTER VI

"TAKE HIM OUT!"

FLINGING his club toward the bench, Harney jogged lazily down the line, grinning into the faces of the dissatisfied and sullen Kingsbridgers on the bleachers. The chortling coacher hailed him hilariously:

"Too bad! Too bad! That pudding is scared stiff. He won't last an innin'. Back to the pastures for him."

The murmurs of the home crowd became louder: "Who ever heard of him, anyhow?" "He can't pitch!" "Who picked him up?" "He's Hen Cope's find." "What's old Cope know about baseball?" "That dub never saw a real game before."

Cope put a hand on Hutchinson's shoulder. "The boy'll settle down in a minute," he said, trying to speak in a confident and undisturbed way. "He's just a bit shaky to start with, but he'll git into gear soon."

"He'd better—in a hurry," retorted the manager in that same dead-level, colorless voice.

"Four straight balls to begin a game is some rotten pitching."

"I don't s'pose he's uster this sort of a crowd," admitted Cope apologetically, coming round and seating himself beside Hutchinson. "He's a gentleman, and he's usually played with—er—well, gentlemanly comp'ny."

"He's out of his element here. This is real baseball, played by scrappers who are ready to fight every inch of the way. Tell me, Mr. Cope, where did you discover that worthless piece of excess baggage?"

The elder man's face became still redder. "Never you mind about that. I've watched his record, and it's a good one. I didn't buy no pig in a poke. Didn't he stop Fryeburg arter Deever blew up?"

"They're marks. Deever made monkeys of them until his sore wing pegged out. Anybody with a straight ball and a little speed could have held 'em."

"Mebbe so: but, all the same, I know this feller can pitch."

"If he don't show some signs of it pretty soon, I'll bench him and send Skillings in."

"Now, you give him a show; you give him a chance. He'll straighten out, and show you some-

thin'. I'm backin' him, and I want you to listen to me."

"I had an idea," said Hutchinson icily, "that I was engaged to manage this team."

"You was, but I've got somethin' to say, and I insist that that boy has a good, square show."

"Ball!"

Andy Trollop, following Harney at bat, stood lounging, with the club on his shoulder, and watched the first wide one pass, laughing as Oulds, reaching, growled beneath his breath.

"If you try to stop 'em all, Hunchy," said Andy, with pretended solicitude, "you'll strain yourself, and have a doctor's bill to pay. Better let 'em go to the net."

"You go to blazes!" retorted Oulds; which caused Andy to laugh still more.

Instead of throwing the ball to Locke, the catcher suddenly lined it to first base, causing Harney to lunge back under Hinkey's arm to the sack.

Then Oulds removed his mask, and pretended to fuss with the elastic strap, which gave Stark an opportunity to run up to the pitcher and softly urge him to go slow and force Trollop to swing.

"He thinks you can't get 'em over," whispered the captain, "and mebbe he won't strike at the

first one or two you put across. Keep it close, and take a chance. Don't use a bender till you have to. Now, do steady down, son."

Locke's only reply was a nod. His lips were pressed together, and his face was gray. He could hear the crowd growling everywhere save in the section occupied by the laughing, scoffing Bancrofters; try as he might, he could not deafen his ears to those unpleasant sounds.

"Play ball!" yelled a coacher.

"Play ball, and stop chewin' the rag," roared a man from the third-base bleachers. "I come here to see a game."

"Don't look like you'd see much of a one today," said another man. "I'd like to git my money back now."

Hinkey tossed the ball to Locke. The youngster was deliberate enough in his movements, but still, seeking to put a straight one over on the inside, he compelled the second batter to make a hasty get-away. Oulds popped up from behind the batsman, ready to throw, but Harney had taken no chances.

"Don't have to do it with this duck pitchin',' laughed the captain of the Bullies. "He'll walk us all. It's a shame."

Now not a few of the local players were be-

ginning to betray annoyance and disgust, and the complaints of the home crowd grew louder. Henry Cope perspired from every pore; but Bob Hutchinson, still with his palm propping his chin, his cold eyes fixed on Locke, did not stir. The harassed pitcher walked in a small, complete circle round the slab.

"Say eeny, meeny, miney, mo, Lefty," advised one of the coachers. "That'll sure break the hoodoo."

"For the love of Mike, do put one over!" entreated a Kingsbridger piteously—so piteously that a few, who had not permitted their sufferings wholly to rob them of their sense of humor, laughed.

But Locke actually handed up the seventh straight ball in succession! This despite the fact that he had never tried harder in all his life to find the plate.

The clamor swelled; the crowd began to hurl insults at the unfortunate twirler. The Bancroft players, waiting on the bench to bat, were choking with laughter. One coacher did monkey-shines, and the other pretended to weep, boring his knuckles into his eyes and bellowing lustily.

Oulds held the ball until ordered to throw it, by the umpire. Locke made a two-handed muff of

that easy toss, and the insults came thicker. Harney, dancing off first, sought to draw a throw, knowing the pitcher in his present state of mind might put the ball into the bleachers.

Locke did throw to first, but he took so much care that the runner was lounging on the sack when Hinkey got the sphere.

"You couldn't throw out a sick cat in four million years, Lefty," mocked the coacher.

The local players looked at Captain Stark; Stark looked at Hutchinson on the bench; Hutchinson did not move a muscle.

"Don't delay the game," begged Harney. "Let the lobster pitch, if you're going to."

Skillings, chewing gum, in anticipation of the call every one seemed to believe must come directly, was keeping his arm limbered by throwing to Deever, the latter sparing his sore wing by tossing the sphere back with his left hand.

Locke's forehead was knotted as he once more toed the slab. This time he came near getting the ball across, but it missed the corner by an inch, and the umpire, now back of the pitcher, made a sweeping signal with his left arm for Trollop to go down.

"Here we go round the mulberry bush," sang Harney, jogging to second; but his words were

drowned by the catcalls, whoops, and jeers of the spectators.

"Oh, you left-handed lobster!"

"You're on the blink!"

"Go die somewhere!"

"You can't pitch!"

"You never could pitch!"

"Take it away and bury it!"

"Chase yourself, you skate!"

Eight balls without a break had Tom Locke thrown, passing the first two men to face him. And this was the great southpaw man Kingsbridge had heard so much about lately, the left-handed wizard who was to make the hated Bullies bite the dust!

"Take him out!" shrieked a voice above the clamor.

Instantly the crowd took it up on all sides. "Take him out!" they roared. "Take him out! Take him out!"

Bob Hutchinson lifted his chin from his hand, sat up straight, and turned to Henry Cope.

"Well?" he said.

CHAPTER VII

HIMSELF AGAIN

AMONG the spectators, doubtless, the performance of Tom Locke gave no one keener disappointment and chagrin than that experienced by Janet Harting. She almost writhed, her fair forehead knotted and her rosy mouth puckering and pouting. Once she stood up, but the horses, possibly getting a glimpse of her parasol, started, and young King, quieting them, suggested that it would be best for her to remain on the seat.

"Oh, isn't it just mean!" the girl cried, as Locke continued to search in vain for the pan. "Everybody expected him to do so much. Mr. Cope was so sure about him, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Bent. "For the last few days the whole town has been talking about the wonderful new pitcher and what he would do."

"It's a shame! Why, he can't pitch at all!"

"It doesn't seem so, but perhaps he may steady down. I once saw a pitcher pass three men

straight, and then strike out the next three without a break."

"Oh, but this one never could do a thing like that. He can't put even a straight one over; he hasn't a bit of control."

"You talk like a fan, Janet. Your father is such a crank—er, excuse me!—that he wouldn't let you see the games last year. Where did you pick up your knowledge?"

"Boarding school. Some of us girls used to get to the college games on Saturday. I declare, I do believe he's going to walk this batter, too! Why don't they take him out and let some one pitch who knows how?"

"There's Cope talking to the manager on the bench. The old man is stubborn, and I presume he's set on giving the great pitcher he signed all the show possible. It hurts his pride to see the fellow fizzle this way."

Janet's blue eyes flashed. "It's simply dreadful!" she panted. "Every day last year I got the score of the games, and it made me ill when our team went to pieces at last, the way it did. And everybody has been saying we'd surely beat Bancroft this year. Hear them mocking us over there! Oh, I'm sorry I came to-day!"

"Cheer up; the game isn't lost just because a

false alarm is unmasking himself in the first inning. The home crowd is getting hot now, and they'll demand that the fellow be benched directly. We've got other pitchers, you know."

"Other pitchers! Don't call this one a pitcher! He's a—a—"

"A flash in the pan," laughed King. "It's a good thing he has betrayed himself right off the reel, for that will give us all the more time to recover from the shock. There, there goes the second batter to first. Now hear the crowd rub it into the poor dub. Oh, say! they're soaking him. There'll be a riot if he isn't sent to the stable pretty quick. Listen to that! I knew it!"

The exasperated Kingsbridgers were howling for the removal of Locke, the cry to take him out immediately swelling into a roar from all sides of the field. Forgetting the cautioning words of her companion, Miss Harting again sprang to her feet.

"Take him out!" she cried; but her voice was drowned in the mighty volume of sound.

"Steady, Janet," said Bent, taking hold of her arm with one hand and gently drawing her back to the seat. "This racket is making the nags nervous, and I'd hate to spill you out, after promising your grudging father to look after you and

see that nothing happened. They'll have to put the blanket on Lefty now. The crowd won't stand for any more of him."

On the Kingsbridge bench Henry Cope and Manager Hutchinson were arguing over it, the former hot and insistent, the latter cold and unemotionally scornful.

"One chance more—give him another show," demanded Cope. "I tell ye I *know* he can pitch."

"Perhaps he can pitch hay," returned Hutchinson; "but not baseball. Listen to that howling mob. They'll murder him pretty quick. I don't want the responsibility on my shoulders."

"I'll take all the responsibility; he's my man, and I'll shoulder it. Let him try the next feller."

"When the whole town gets to kicking at me, will you stand up and say you insisted on it against my wishes?"

"Didn't I jest say I'd shoulder it! Nobody shan't put the blame on you."

"Oh, all right. They'll mob him on the diamond if he hands out another pass, and that's just what he'll do. He's white as a ghost with fear. He couldn't get the ball over now if his life depended on it."

Indeed, the wretched pitcher was ghastly white, the pallor of his face making his dark-brown eyes

seem almost black; and into the depths of those eyes had come a light like a dull-red flame, flaring up swiftly.

A few moments before he had felt his own nerves unsteady, and fought in vain for control of them; now, with the howling demand for his removal hammering into his ears, he suddenly found himself steady as a foundation rock. His resentment and anger was of the white-hot variety that transmutes. A man serene and calm it might unnerve; one doubtful and wavering it might turn to iron.

Slowly he turned until he had faced every side of the field, and all that mass of snarling humanity, yelling at him, jeering, insulting, shaking their fists, their faces red and wroth, their eyes full of contempt, their lips hurling forth threats of bodily violence—and he smiled at them.

"Howl away," he said, but no one save himself heard the words. "I'll show you some pitching yet."

Never before had he pitched in the presence of a crowd of such crude, seemingly ferocious, human beings; but many a time, as he well knew, he had faced batters as skillful and dangerous as these raw, would-be professionals and broken-down cast-offs from minor leagues.

At no time had he feared the hitting ability of his opponents, but, as sometimes happens to the headiest and most seasoned veteran, the moment he toed the slab some incomprehensible thing had taken possession of him, and made him a mockery for the crowd and a sickening shame to himself.

Now, however, he knew the unmanning spirit had been exorcised; he was himself again, clean and fit.

CHAPTER VIII

STEADYING DOWN

TOM LOCKE did not turn his eyes toward the bench; he did not dare, lest a glance should be interpreted as a supplication, and bring about his removal from the field. He saw Oulds, ball in hand, standing squarely on the plate, while "Wop" Grady, the next batter, eager to keep things going and gain as much advantage for Bancroft as possible before another pitcher was sent in, was seeking to push him back into his position.

His manner entirely changed, although his face continued ashen, Locke beckoned to the catcher, and ran forward. Oulds, scowling, sour, sullen, met him five feet in front of the pan.

"Give me that ball," said Locke, taking it from the catcher's hand. "Call the curves: a drop or a high inshoot for a strike-out, whichever you happen to know this man is weakest on. I'm going to get him."

"Yes, you are!" sneered Oulds. "Why, you can't—"

"Get ready to catch me," Locke cut him short. "I tell you I'm going to get this man."

Then, seemingly deaf to the continued howling of the crowd, he turned and walked back, apparently disregarding the taunting base runners, who were dancing off the sacks to lure a throw.

Larry Stark, doubtless wondering that Hutchinson had not signaled for a change, stood listless, twelve feet off second; but, without betraying the fact, Locke observed that Jim Sockamore, the Indian center fielder, apparently hoping to work an old trick in the midst of the excitement, was walking swiftly, but unobtrusively, in toward the sack. Indeed, Sockamore was not twenty feet from the bag when the pitcher faced Grady at the plate.

Only for an instant were Locke's eyes turned toward the batsman; like a flash, he whirled again to face second, and the ball shot from his fingers as he turned.

He had not received a signal to throw, but he did so on the chance that the foxy Indian player would sneak all the way to the hassock, if for no other purpose than to show up what might have been pulled off with a live pitcher on the slab.

Sockamore was within five feet of the cushion when Locke turned, and, seeing the ball was com-

ing, he leaped forward. Harney, not a little surprised, lunged back. Like a bullet the scarcely soiled ball sped straight into the eager hands of the young redskin, who met Harney and jabbed it on to him viciously as the Bancroft captain weakly sought to slip under.

The howling of the angry and dissatisfied crowd was instantly cut short. The sudden silence was ruptured by a single hoarse word shot from the lips of the umpire, who had been so surprised that for a moment he had faltered in giving the decision:

"Out!"

The spectators gasped; Harney choked and rumbled weakly. Sockamore grinned into the face of the tricked and chagrined man. At the bench, Henry Cope brought his hand down with a resounding slap upon his thigh, crying jubilantly:

"There! He got him!"

After a few moments of dazed silence, some scattered persons ventured to applaud and cheer faintly, while, apparently struck by the seeming incongruity of the unexpected performance, many others laughed.

"Oh, what an accident!" groaned one of the coachers, as Harney, his face red with mortification, rose to his feet and gave Locke a stare.

"How'd you ever happen to think of it?" sneered the Bancroft captain.

Chuckling, Sockamore threw the ball to the pitcher, and capered back into center field. Harney, his mouth twisted and his cheeks burning, made slowly for the Bancroft bench.

"Accidents will happen," came from a coacher. "Never mind that. Take a constitutional, Wop; he'll accommodate ye."

Grady idled at the pan, laughing silently over the discomfiture of his captain. He was still idling when Locke, seeing Oulds ready, shot over a scorcher that clipped the inside corner.

"Strike!" declared the umpire.

"What's that? What's that?" cried the coacher. "It can't be poss-i-bill? Another accident!"

Surprise was general, but still, like the coacher, the spectators on the bleachers and in the stand fancied it related in a way to something "accidental," and not one in a hundred thought it probable that the left-hander could put over another without wasting several.

Oulds, wondering, called for an out-drop, but Locke, knowing the batter had not yet been egged into a condition that would make him easy to "pull," shook his head. The signal was changed

to one requesting a straight drop, and the pitcher swung into a snappy, quick delivery.

The ball seemed to be too high, and not looking for the despised twirler to "put much on it," Grady permitted himself to be caught again. Down past his shoulders shot the sphere, to the instant croaking of "Strike tuh!" from the umpire.

"Hey, hey! What's comin' off here?" bellowed an uncoated, unshaven, collarless man back of first base. "Lightnin's hit agin in the same place."

CHAPTER IX

SOME PITCHING!

THERE was a change in the aspect of the crowd and its behavior, for this was more like something worth while, and a few were beginning to think it possible they might have underestimated the ability of the southpaw slabman. Yet, lost confidence had not been wholly restored, and they waited to see what the final result would be, the Kingsbridgers silent, the Bancroft crowd still laughing and scoffing.

"Never mind, Wop," called the coacher at third. "He can't do it agin. If he does, give it a ride. Come on, Trollop; git off that mattress—tear yourself free. On your toes! Ready to scorch if Wop biffs it. Git away, away, away off! More than that! I'll watch the ball. Come on! Come on!"

Locke drove Trollop back to the sack once, following which he quickly pitched the third ball to Grady. He had a way of throwing every one in almost precisely the same manner, which prevented a batter from judging what was coming by

his style of delivery. It looked like another high one that might turn into a drop, but it proved to be a fancy inshoot, and Grady, doing his prettiest to connect, made a clean miss.

"Y'u're out!" barked the umpire.

Then the crowd did cheer, for, in amazing contrast to the manner in which he had opened up, Tom Locke had whiffed Grady without wasting one.

Henry Cope poked the silent Hutchinson in the ribs. "What'd I tell ye? What'd I tell ye?" he spluttered delightedly. "Now I guess you'll see I ain't such a bonehead in pickin' pitchers. I played this game myself once."

"Wait," said the manager without a flutter, or the slightest variation of intonation. "Strikin' out one man that's looking to walk don't make a pitcher. He's got to show me more'n that."

"He'll show ye, all right," asserted Cope. "I knew what he c'd do."

Gus Mace followed Grady at the pan. The right fielder of the Bullies, he was regarded as their heaviest hitter, and his batting the year before had caused the Kingsbridgers to groan with grief. He was boiling over with confidence as he faced Locke, but, getting a signal from Riley, he let the first one pass, in order that Trollop, grown

weary of camping on first, might try to steal.

It was a strike, and Oulds winged it to second in the effort to nail the runner, who had made a flying start and was burning up the ground. Trollop slid, spikes first, and Stark, who seemed to have him nipped, dropped the sphere in the attempt to avoid those spikes and tag the man at the same time. Trollop was safe.

"Now's the time, Mace!" cried the coacher back of third. "Hit it out. Give it a long sail, and let Andy walk home." He had dropped his chatter about waiting for a pass.

Mace gripped his trusty war club and waited, crouching a little. It was plain that the Kinks' new pitcher had recovered his control, and the batter meant to hit anything that came across. He struck left-handed, and the next one pitched looked good to him. It dragged him almost across the pan, and he did not even foul it lightly.

A sharp yell went up from the once-more vibrant and excited crowd, but this time it was a yell of satisfaction. Choking, agitated men began to predict that Lefty would fan Mace, also.

"If he does," said one, "I'm goin' to throw a fit right here! I'll own up honest that I'm the biggest fool that ever barked like a sore-eared pup at a good man."

The Bancrofters were still trying hard to rattle Locke, but now, absolutely cool, self-possessed, and confident, he gave no more heed to their racket than he might to the buzzing of a single fly. There was something in his clean-cut face, his steady eyes, firm mouth, and deliberate manner which proclaimed him absolute master of himself, and predicted that he also would show himself master of the situation.

Oulds, his confidence completely restored, grinned through the meshes of the wire mask. "I reckon you was jest monkeyin' with 'em boy," he said. "They'll all look alike to ye from now on. This one's jest as easy as any."

And so it proved, for Big Mace slashed again, and found nothing but empty air; whereupon the Kingsbridge crowd rose in a body and roared a splendid salvo for the man they had been reviling and threatening a short time before.

As that burst of applause died away, a Neapolitan laborer, standing on the bleachers, his shirt open at the throat, the oily, blue-black hair of his bared head shining in the sun, his kindled eyes almost popping, and his teeth flashing like scimitars, shook his grimy fists in the air, and screamed:

"What's-a da mat' with-a da Lefty?"

The answer was a great shout of laughter, and

another hearty round of applause, which told how suddenly and completely the humor of that recently raging and reviling assemblage had altered. He whom a few minutes before they were deriding and threatening, had, by his amazing performance, become the admired idol of the moment, the Horatius at the bridge, the Moses to find the promised land.

They were more than willing to accept him as king of warriors and savior of wilderness wanderers, but to retain his scepter he must still further demonstrate his prowess in battle or his ability to smite a dry-shod pathway across a mythical Red Sea.

CHAPTER X

A PITCHERS' BATTLE

AS Locke walked calmly toward the bench he found Captain Stark at his side, laughing. "You pulled outer that hole in great shape, old man," said Larry; "but you sure had us all leery to start with. I reckoned you was plumb up in the air."

"I was," admitted the pitcher unhesitatingly; "but I managed to get my feet under me after a while."

His face was no longer pale; the color had returned to his cheeks, and a flickering smile played at the corners of his fine mouth.

Henry Cope, beaming, made room for the players on the bench. "I knowed it," he said. "I tole 'em so."

Having unemotionally watched the new pitcher approach, Manager Hutchinson spoke to Stark. "See if you can't start something right away," he directed. "Mebbe we'll get 'em going if we score the first time up."

Larry nodded, and whispered hastily to the

leading batter, Labelle, a slim, shifty French Canadian, a heady single hitter, and an unusually fast man on the sacks. Labelle grinned, and found his bat.

Possibly the Bancroft manager was more disgusted than disappointed, as the sarcastic comments which he flung at his offending players seemed to indicate; but as yet he had not been aroused to apprehension concerning the ultimate outcome of the game, and he felt that, were the Kinks' left-hander really formidable, it had well happened that his men had been forwarned thus early in the contest.

Having relieved his feelings by a flaying fling at Mace, as the final victim of Locke's skill secured his fielding mitt from the bench, Riley cast aside the remnants of his cigar, lighted a fresh weed, and prepared to watch Jock Hoover make monkeys of the locals.

Janet Harting was overjoyed. "Oh, wasn't that splendid!" she cried, impulsively squeezing her companion's arm with one gloved hand. "It was *such* a surprise! I never expected it."

"No more did any one, I fancy," said King, laughing. "It's the unexpected that so frequently happens which makes baseball the fascinating game it is. Apparently that fellow can

pitch some, after all. I wonder where he came from."

"Mr. Cope won't tell, and nobody around here seems to know."

"Somehow I have a feeling that I've seen him before, but I can't place him."

"Perhaps he's some great college pitcher," said the girl.

"I don't know about that, but if he is I reckon he's here under a fake name; for you know it makes college twirlers professionals to play for money. A man is barred if he's ever caught at it. Just the same, some of them, needing the dough, take the risk. Up here in this league a man would stand a fair chance of getting by without being exposed."

"It's—it's supposed to be dishonest, isn't it?"

"Yes; but necessity has driven more than one good man to shut his eyes to that phase of the matter. If this Locke was known at all as a professional, some of the players of this league should recognize him."

"I don't like to think that he's a college man who would do such a thing," said Janet earnestly.

"Oh-ho!" cried Bent. "So you're taking considerable interest in the chap you thought couldn't pitch at all."

"Well," she faltered, "he—he looks clean and honest. One can see he isn't like the others—the most of them, anyway. Kingsbridge is going to bat now. I hope they can do something."

Hoover had shaken the kinks out of his arm by two or three throws to first, and, glancing round to make sure his backers were in position and ready, he stepped on to the slab and glowered at Labelle. Squatting, Bangs signaled, and the fire-eating twirler swung into his first delivery.

Although a "waiter," with an excellent eye, Labelle seldom permitted himself to pass up the first one if it came over the rubber, and he sought to land on Hoover's corner-cutting slant. The resulting foul counted against the batter as a strike.

"That's a nibble; take a bite," shouted a coacher.

Labelle stamped his spikes into the ground, and squared himself again, unruffled. Hoover leered at him vindictively. The crowd rooted.

CHAPTER XI

ON THE RAW EDGE

TWO balls followed swiftly, the batter ignoring them both, although with every nerve taut.

"Got to put 'em over, Jocko," called the coacher. "You can't pull that little Canuck."

Hoover handed up a "spitter," and Labelle missed cleanly.

"He never could touch you," chuckled the first baseman.

"You've got his measure," declared the shortstop.

"Give him another in the same place," urged the guardian of third.

"Oh, let him hit," begged the center fielder. "He won't get it out of the diamond."

Again, and once again, the Canadian fouled; and then Hoover caught him with a deceptive slant for another clean miss, and Labelle retired, disappointed.

Stark came next, and, like the leading sticker, his best efforts resulted only in weak fouls, the

Bully on the slab finally sending him back to the bench by the whiff route, to the loud acclaim of the admiring Bancrofters on the bleachers.

"They'll never locate you to-day, Jock," shouted one of these. "Show up their southpaw wizard. Make a record."

Reddy Crandall proved to be quite as easy as his predecessors, and Hoover finished his first turn with the third straight strike-out, not even seeming to hear the wild applause of his admirers as he sauntered, sour and unsmiling, to the bench.

More than one of those admirers, even while fulsome with praise, had sometimes felt a strong desire to kick the ungrateful, egotistical, pugnacious star slabman of the champions, who, among his browbeating teammates, even, was not much courted for his society off the field.

Riley, the only person who never praised or flattered him, had discovered some secret process of holding him in check and making him of inestimable value to the team.

"Now, you fellers," growled the Bancroft manager, speaking with the cigar between his teeth, "I want ye t' go after this left-handed dub, and chaw him up. Put the willer to him, and break his heart. You had him almost out when

you slipped a cog t'other time. Git to first, McGovern, and th' boys will push ye round."

"I'll make the sack somehow," promised McGovern, as he started out with his big bat, conquest in his heart.

Exactly thirty-two seconds later Pat McGovern came back to the bench, fanned, having found his left-handed position at the plate most disadvantageous in batting against the Kinks' southpaw. Riley was growling throatily as Otto Bernsteine went forth to pit his wits and skill against the brains and cleverness of Tom Locke.

To tell the truth, Bernsteine, although usually phlegmatic and unemotional, was worried; for he, also, hit left-handed, and he had begun to believe that the Kingsbridge twirler was a terror to batters who stood at the plate in that manner. His worriment was justified; Locke got him, also.

The uproar of the crowd drowned the remarks of one Michael Riley, manager of the Bancrofts; and this may have spared the nerves of any sensitive person in his immediate vicinity. "Hey, Lisotte," he snarled at the shortstop, who was the next in line, "bunt the ball. D'ye hear? Bunt, an' try to beat it out. You bat wrong, too, and ye can't hit him fair. He's got the Injun sign on you off-side sluggers."

Lisotte did his best, but the first ball he bunted rolled foul, and the next he tried for, being close and high, was missed completely. Fearing to try another bunt, he finally swung after one that came slanting over, and missed that also.

The best stickers of the Bullies had faced Locke in two innings, and not one had obtained as much as a scratch single off him; realizing which, the local crowd had spasms of many sorts. With faith completely restored, the Kingsbridgers were telling one another exultantly that, at last, the man had been found to hold the hated enemy in check. Visions of the Northern League pennant waving over their grand stand at the finish of the season already danced before their eyes.

The Bancrofters, although saying that the game was young, and pretending their confidence was as great as ever, were really suffering the qualms of apprehension, all the more intense and disturbing because of the early elation they had felt.

When Kingsbridge's Italian right fielder, Tony Anastace, opened the second for the locals with a clean safety, this rejoicing on one side and apprehension on the other was redoubled.

But Jack Hinkey popped to the infield, Anastace was slaughtered trying to purloin second,

and Fred Lace lifted a high foul back of third for Wop Grady to smother, squaring things up with not a count for either side.

Although Locke, feeling that he had the confidence of his teammates at last, seemed to take it easier, a measly scratch single was all Bancroft could find him for in the third; and, with Hoover hitting a two-minute clip in the last of the same inning, even the least astute spectator understood that it was practically certain to be a pitchers' battle right through to the finish.

With the passing of the innings, and the failure of his teammates to score, Hoover steadily became more savage in the box. At times, under cover of the shouting of the crowd, he insulted the batters with venomous, blood-tingling words.

Contrary to his usual practice, he sought the privilege of going on to the coaching line, where his sneers and slurs were of a nature that aroused protests from the crowd, and finally forced Riley to keep him on the bench when he was idle.

Locke opened the sixth by fanning Trollop, Grady, and Mace, one after another; and then, in the final half, he came first to bat for Kingsbridge.

"Get back off the pan, you peanut-headed sample of nature's carelessness," rasped Hoover,

ready to pitch. "Get back, or I'll take a rib outer yer!"

"I'm in my box," returned Locke calmly. "Pitch the ball, sorehead."

With a murderous expression, Hoover scorched one straight at his rival, and Tom barely escaped being hit by a most amazing, lightninglike dodge. This brought the Kingsbridge crowd up howling wrathfully, and Locke, recovering his position at the pan, cried loudly enough for Hoover to hear:

"Try it again, old boy—try it again, and they'll be coming after you with war clubs and scalping knives."

Captain Harney ran out and grabbed Hoover. "Keep your head, Jock—keep your head," he begged. "He's won the crowd. He's got 'em with him. You'll start a fight that'll mean busted heads if you hit him on purpose."

Already two constables, wearing their badges displayed, were having their hands full to keep back a few hot-headed ones, who seemed eager to charge upon the diamond to reach Hoover.

CHAPTER XII

THE "SQUEEZE PLAY"

IN a town like Kingsbridge, such a movement meant a general stampede, followed by a riot, in which more than one participant would "get his."

Harney continued to talk to Hoover until the raging pitcher, the freckles on his face seeming to stand out like innumerable islands in a grayish sea, promised to behave. The umpire seemed practically helpless.

Locke had waited quietly. He gripped his bat, and squared away as he saw Hoover making ready. The ball came over the outside corner with a shoot, and Tom met it. It was a beautiful, clean single into right field.

The crowd was still roaring when Labelle rushed forth to the pan, signaling that he would attempt a sacrifice. Locke was on his toes, and ready, and he started as Hoover began his short delivery. True to his signaled promise, the Canadian dropped a bunt in front of the pan, thus easily giving the runner ahead of him second, al-

though he himself was cut down in his last jump for first.

With one out, a runner on second, and Captain Larry Stark ready to wield the willow, the local crowd whooped it up like crazy Indians at a ghost dance, believing Kingsbridge had its chance to score.

It was plain that the new pitcher, besides being fast on his feet and ready to take chances, had the faculty of leaping away almost at top speed with his first stride or two, and a long, clean single might enable him to score from second.

Hoover knew this, and was inwardly disturbed. Although he had already twice cut Stark down at the pan, previous experiences warned him that, as a batter to advance runners, the cool, heady, sure-eyed Kingsbridge captain was far more dangerous than the heavier-hitting Crandall, who followed him. Therefore, being supported by a sign from the bench, Jock decided to pass Larry, and take his chances with Crandall and Anastace.

First driving Locke back twice to second, but being unable to keep him hugging the cushion, Hoover handed up a wide one with such elaborate method that he betrayed his purpose immediately.

Promptly with the next pitch, something happened: Locke was leaping away toward third

before the ball left Jock's fingers. Grady covered the sack, and Bangs scorched the air with his quick line throw, but the runner slipped under, and was safe by a narrow margin. Bill Harney disputed the decision, while the crowd howled; but the umpire waved him back to first.

Eyes bulging, throats dry, nerves twitching, the Kingsbridge spectators rooted for a run. Some were purple-faced and perspiring; others were pale and cold; all were wrought to the highest pitch of expectation and excitement.

The face of the wrothy Hoover was twisted into a snarl, and, as the ball came back to him, he betrayed momentary indecision.

Immediately Locke caught a signal from Stark, given by the Kingsbridge captain with his back toward third, his attention seemingly focused on the man on the slab, and the runner knew Larry would seek to hit the next pitched ball if he could possibly reach it without stepping out of the box. Crouching like a runner ready for the crack of the starter's pistol, Locke crept off third.

The ball was wide of the rubber, but, reaching far across, Stark found it with the end of his long bat, and tapped it into the diamond, immediately getting away on the jump for first.

Locke had not failed to obey the signal for the

"squeeze," and he was coming like the wind when the bat and ball met. Hoover forked fruitlessly at the ball as it caracoled past, but it was McGovern who scooped it, and lined it home in hope of nipping the runner.

A blighted hope it was, for the flying man slid safely, and Bangs, recognizing the uselessness of trying to tag him, winged the sphere to first, where it arrived a moment too late to get Stark.

Far better than words, imagination may picture the uproar of that hysterical moment.

Gradually the cheering ceased, and the hoarse and happy Kingsbridgers became semirational. To Stark, in a way, as much credit was due for that finely worked squeeze as to Locke; but it seemed that the name of the latter was on every lip. He had made the play possible by his hit and steal, and the delighted crowd howled blessings at him long after he was seated on the bench.

Locke's manager looked him over unemotionally, and then sent Crandall out to the pan, with instructions. Hutchinson did not believe in spoiling a youngster with praise. Furthermore, the game was far from over, and experience had taught him that the time to count chickens was after the hatching.

One man, at least, was wholly happy; Henry Cope was confident that, after this, his fellow members of the Kingsbridge Baseball Association, who had given him carte blanche to secure a star pitcher, at any price, could not make much protest when they learned that he had contracted to pay Tom Locke one hundred dollars a week and board, a sum far greater than many a minor-league pitcher of promise received.

Janet Harting was delighted beyond words; so delighted, indeed, that her ebullient expressions of joy and unreserved admiration for Locke brought a slight frown to the dark face of Benton King.

There were those, however, who felt no touch of rejoicing.

The Bancroft crowd was silent. Mike Riley sat on the bench, and chewed at his dead cigar, turning only to snarl at Fancy Dyke when the latter called to him anxiously from behind the rail. He had already sneered at his players because of their inability to hit Locke, but there was something of a still more caustic nature awaiting them when they should again assemble at the bench.

CHAPTER XIII

THE LAST STRIKE-OUT

BUT no man on that field felt the sting of the moment as deeply as Jock Hoover, in whose heart hatred for Tom Locke burned like living fire. The wonder and terror of the league, he feared that a blazing sun had risen to eclipse him. The effect upon him was fully apparent when he carelessly let Stark steal second behind his back, which brought upon him the amused scoffing of the Kingsbridgers. Nor did it serve to lessen the bitterness of his soul when, although he still burned the ball over with the sharp slants which an expert "spit artist" commands, Crandall leaned against it for a grasser to right, and Stark, spurred by the shrieking coacher, crossed third, and reached the home plate, adding another tally.

After that, Anastace popped, and Hinkey agitated the air; but the damage was done.

Riley's scathing, acrid arraignment of his batters did no good. Although an error let Mace get to first in the seventh, Locke disposed of the next

three stickers with ease, and apparently without any great exertion.

Hoover returned to the slab in form, and closed the inning with three straight to his credit.

For Bancroft, hope revived when Bangs started the eighth by obtaining a pass, the first to be secured from Locke since the initial inning. Hoover strode out, thirsting for a hit. Had the stab of his eyes been deadly, Tom Locke must have dropped, mortally pierced, in his tracks.

With the head of the list coming up, Riley had called for a sacrifice, and, much as he hated to do it, Hoover sought to obey. He did not even foul the first ball he tried to bunt; but Oulds, in his haste to get Bangs going down, made a bad throw, and the runner reached second base.

"Ah!" thought Jock exultantly. "Now I can hit it out!"

But he could not hit it out, although he did his best. Locke sent him to the bench, fanned and furious.

Harney, however, batted a lingerer into the diamond, and little Labelle eagerly overran it, which put two on the sacks.

It was still a game, and the Bancroft crowd was beginning to froth, while the Kingsbridgers felt their nerves shaking again. With two on, only

one out, and Trollop and Grady to hit, all sorts of things might happen.

What really happened was two strike-outs, which went to the credit of the Kingsbridge southpaw, and made Janet Harting declare she "just wanted to hug him."

Locke was one of Hoover's victims in the eighth, which, however, did not seem to disturb his equanimity in the least, and gave the Bancrofter but poor and unsatisfactory solace. There was no run-getting, and the ninth opened with the Kingsbridgers rooting for Locke to choke it off in a hurry.

The "Bullies" always fought to the finish, and they were in the game to take advantage of anything favorable that might happen. Once more Labelle, who should have easily handled Mace's grounder for an assist, became too eager, and failed to get the ball up cleanly, following with a poor throw that presented the runner with "a life."

Standing, every man Jack of them, the Bancrofters on the bleachers whooped things up desperately. They were disheartened a bit when McGovern hoisted an infield fly, and went to the bench; but they awoke with redoubled energy as

Bernsteine bingled a bone-breaker against Fred Lace's shins, and the third baseman chased it long enough to make fruitless any attempt to get the man.

"Come, Lefty," shouted a Kingsbridger; "you'll have ter do it alone. You ain't gittin' no s'port."

And now, as if he, too, felt the strain of it, and the tension was too much, Tom Locke handed up four balls, and filled the sacks.

"It's the same old story!" shouted Harney from the coaching line. "They've gone to pieces again! We've got 'em! We've got 'em! We win it right here! Old southpaw is making an altitude record! He's gone! He's up out of sight now! He'll never come down! Kill it, Bingo, if he puts one across!"

Kingsbridge was apprehensively silent, taut, and choked with dread; Bancroft howled and screamed like a lot of caged Camorrists. Bangs gripped his club, longing for a two-bagger, or even a long, clean single. Locke took his time, absolutely declining to betray signs of agitation similar to those which had marked his advent upon that field.

"You've got to do it, Lefty!" came entreat-

ingly from the man who had shouted before. "If you fail us now, there'll be a fun'rul after the game."

Locke whipped over a high one.

"Strike!" blared the umpire.

Before Bangs had finished kicking at the decision, the pitcher bent over another.

"Strike tuh!"

"Get against it, Bingo—get against it!" yelled Harney. "Spoil the good ones, anyhow."

Two balls followed. Then came a marvelous drop that Bangs missed by many inches, and Kingsbridge roared, drowning the Bancroft groan.

Jock Hoover had been swinging two bats. He dropped one of them, and walked into the box, stooping a moment to rub his palms on the dry dirt. Never in his life had he desired half as much to get a hit, and never had he believed more firmly that he would get one.

"You're the boy, Jock!" shrieked a rooter. "Bring 'em home! Win your own game, old fightin' cock!"

From the opposite side came a different cry:

"He's your meat, Lefty! Get him, and it's all over! Don't lose him, on your life!"

It was to be the great test. A clean hit would

leave Hoover still supreme in the league; a strike-out would place another far above him. The lips of the Bully at bat curled back from his teeth, and he stood there ready, like a man made of steel springs. With a sort of placid grimness, Locke swung into his delivery.

Hoover fouled the first one into the bleachers.

"Strike!"

"That's one on him!"

"You've got him coming, Lefty!"

"He can't hit you!"

"You can't let him hit!"

"Do it again!"

Hoover stamped his spikes into the ground, rooting himself, that the hit might be effective when he landed on the ball. He had felt of the first one; he would straighten the next one out. In fancy, he saw himself cantering over the sacks, with the runners ahead of him scoring, and the Bancrofters splitting their throats. Doubtless a two-bagger would score all three of the runners; and then, even if he did not reach the rubber himself, he would go out there and hold the "Kinks" runless in the last of the ninth. He knew he could do it.

"Ball-l-l!"

Jock sneered at Locke's teaser. What a chump

the fellow was to think he would reach for anything like that!

"Put one over!" he invited. "You don't dare!"

It came—whistling, high, and taking an inward shoot. Hoover did not graze the horsehide.

"Strike tuh!"

That set the Kingsbridgers off again:

"Get him, Lefty—get him!"

"Oh, you, Lefty!"

"You're the stuff, old boy!"

"Sic him, you wiz!"

"Mow him down!"

"Polish him off!"

"End his suffering, Lefty!"

"Oh, you, Lefty! Oh, you, Lefty!"

Hoover's teeth were grinding together like millstones. Although angered by his failure, he still gripped and held his confidence that he could hit Locke at this time when a hit meant so much; for, as a pinch hitter, he had an enviable record.

Another shoot came over. Jock hit it. But again the ball went into the bleachers, causing the umpire to stop the base runners with a bellow:

"Foul!"

"That's the best he can do, Lefty! He's going! He's almost gone!"

There was a delay. Some one had pocketed the ball, and presently a spotless, fresh one was tossed out to Locke.

"Where'll that one go when he hits it?" yelled a Bancrofter.

"When he hits it!" mocked a Kingsbridger. "He never will!"

Leaning forward to get Oulds' signal, Locke gave his head a shake. The sign for a drop was instantly changed to one calling for an inshoot, and the young pitcher lost no time.

There was a white streak in the air, and the ball almost seemed to twist round Hoover's neck, slightly grazing the bat close to his knuckles as he swung. Into Oulds' big mitt it plunked.

"Y're out!" was the cry of the umpire, as he flung his hand upward above his head.

Instantly Hoover called Tom Locke a vile name, and sent the bat, with all the strength of his quivering, muscular arms, spinning straight at the pitcher's head.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER THE GAME

THE indescribable uproar which greeted the strike-out that settled the game prevented Hoover's words from reaching Locke's ears, but the glare in his eyes, the expression of his face, and the movement of his lips told well enough what he said. The triumphant pitcher barely avoided the whistling bat by an agile side spring. In another instant, his face went white; he was coming at Hoover with a rush.

Tense with excitement, Janet Harting saw it all; she saw the steady, youthful, almost boyish, Kingsbridge pitcher fool the Caliban-faced Bully for the final fruitless slash which settled the game, two to nothing, in the home team's favor; saw Hoover, snarling, hurl the bat; and then beheld a swirling rush of shouting, wrathy human beings, who smashed the restraining rails in front of the bleachers, and poured upon the field like a spring flood from a bursted reservoir.

"I think," said Benton King, gathering the

reins, "that it is time for me to take you away from here, Janet."

Trembling, she grasped his arm. "No, no!" she cried. "What are they going to do? That wretch threw his bat at—at Lefty."

"Yes; and he'll get his, if his friends don't look out for him well. Locke has got all Kingsbridge behind him, and they're a tough bunch when they get good and mad. There's likely to be some broken heads."

"Oh, wait a moment!" she entreated. "Look! They're trying to hold the crowd off, and I believe Lefty is helping them."

Out there on the diamond, raging, frothing men were shaking their fists at the offending pitcher; while others, including a number of Kingsbridge players, having packed themselves round the threatened man, were holding the hot-heads back by main force. And it was true that Tom Locke was one of those who sought to protect Jock Hoover from the wolfish mob.

"Stop!" his voice rang out, clear and distinct. "Keep back! The trouble is between that man and me. We'll settle it."

"Let-a me git at-a him!" raged an Italian, the same who had amused the crowd after the striking out of Mace in the first inning, by asking what

was the matter with Lefty. "He throw-a da bat! I knock-a da block off-a da sneak-a!"

His cigar gone, his hat smashed, his collar torn awry, Mike Riley succeeded in reaching Hoover.

"You infernal idiot!" he puffed. "Didn't you know better? What made ye do it?"

"Bah!" retorted Jock with contempt and courage worthy of a better cause. "These barking curs won't do anything. Give me a show, and I'll break that left-handed dub's face. He hasn't got the courage to give me an opportunity right now —here. He's a——" The concluding epithet was a repetition of the insult he had hurled at Locke along with the bat.

"No man can swallow that!" muttered Larry Stark. "Somebody must fight that miserable rowdy."

"Give me the chance," said Tom Locke, "and give him the same even show, without interference. Let the crowd keep back." They marveled at his calmness.

Some of Hoover's friends sought to rush him off, against his will, and the vociferous, twisting, lunging mass of humanity swept over to one side of the diamond, where Bent King had his hands full in the task of restraining his fretting span from plunging forward and trampling some of

them. King had listened to Janet's appeal, and dallied a few moments too long; now they were caught in the midst of the mob that packed close on all sides. Two men, taking note of his difficulty, grasped the horses by the bits; but the crowd, seemingly deaf and oblivious to everything except the imminent fist fight, could not be induced to make way.

"I'm sorry, Janet," said the lumberman's son. "This is no place for you. I was a fool to wait a minute when the trouble began."

"Never mind," she returned, her voice quivering a little, her face quite colorless. "I—I want to see. It isn't right for them to fight; it isn't fair. Lefty can't be a match for that ruffian. Why don't they stop it?"

Not much time was wasted in preparation when it was understood that Locke was ready to meet his challenger. Members of the two teams began pushing the crowd back to make room, begging them to give the men a chance, and a fifteen-foot space was finally cleared. Eager spectators climbed upon the shoulders of those in front of them; the bleachers, at one end, were loaded to the cracking point with human beings; and every stout limb of a near-by tree quickly bore human fruit.

Bareheaded, the men met in the center of the cleared space. Hoover came with a rush, and Locke was not dilatory. Plainly the Bully weighed ten or fifteen pounds more than his slender antagonist, and many a sympathizer with the youth feared the match must prove to be pitifully one-sided.

Jock led, right and left; but the youngster parried, blocked, and countered like lightning, closing in without hesitation. His jaw was set, and he was still cool, while the Bancrofter blazed with all the fury of a conflagration.

The sound of thudding blows caused Janet Harting to drop her parasol, which she had closed; her hands went up to her heart, and her lips were parted that she might breathe, the open air seeming close and smothery.

CHAPTER XV

MAN TO MAN

IT was a scene to be printed indelibly on the memory: The palpitant, swaying crowd, those in front pushed forward by those behind; the baseball players round the edges of the cleared space, bracing to hold the mob back almost by main strength; human beings climbing on other human beings to get a momentary glimpse of the fighters; men and boys jammed in a dense mass on the bleachers, and still more of them clinging like monkeys to the bending limbs of the tree—and every face ablaze with the primitive passion of mankind, the savage zest of battle, the barbarous joy of witnessing a sanguinary struggle between two of their specie.

But Janet saw only the fighters; not for a moment did her straining eyes waver or wander. She watched them leap and retreat, meet again, stagger, recover, sway this way and that, all the time turning round and round to the left or to the right, their arms flashing out, their battering fists giving forth sounds now sharp, now sodden,

as they smashed on head or body. She saw the head of the brown-haired youth jerk backward before a blow full on the mouth; and then, as blood stained his lips, a cry—half snarl, half roar—broke from the crowd.

Hoover had drawn first blood, seeing which, an expression of malicious joy contorted his repellent face, and he seemed spurred to still fiercer efforts. He thirsted to leave the stamp of his fists indelibly recorded on that clean-cut face; to mark the youth for life would be an exquisite pleasure, lingering long in aftertaste.

Locke, however, continued to keep his head, improving such openings as he could find or make. A cut lip was of no consequence when he had not felt the blow much; but he must take care that his antagonist did not reach his jaw with a swing like that, having a bit more steam behind it. And he must husband his energy and bide his time, for this was no fight by rounds, and Hoover had set a pace which flesh and blood could not keep up protractedly. In time, he must weary and slacken, and Locke hoped to be ready to make the most of it when this faltering came.

The youth's left-handed guard bothered Jock somewhat, causing him to fret and snarl. Twice

he pinned Locke up against the crowd, that could not make room for his free movement; but once Tom got under his arm and away, and once he met the aggressor with such a sudden storm of blows that Hoover was checked and driven back. After that both men were bleeding, the Bully having received a stiff smash on the nose.

The crowd shouted applause and instruction:

"Fine work, Lefty!"

"Keep after him, Jock! Put him out!"

"You've got him going! Follow him up!"

"Look out for his left, boy!"

"Soak him another in the same place—that's the stuff!"

"Well," said Bent King, in wonderment, "I'll be hanged if Locke isn't holding his own with that terrier!"

Apparently Janet did not hear him. A little color had risen into her cheeks, and her bosom was heaving against her tightly clenched hands. She was still fearful of the final result, but he with whom her throbbing heart sympathized had met his brutal enemy like a man of courage, and made it a worthy battle. She could hear Hoover breathing heavily, like one on whom the tremendous strain was beginning to tell at last, while

Locke, although his breast rose and fell rapidly, was, to all outward seeming, the fresher of the two.

Once a little, choking gasp escaped her, for the youth was sent reeling by a blow, Jock rushing forward to follow it up. Locke, however, kept his feet with the agility of a cat, avoiding that rush, and getting in a body punch that made the other man grunt.

Following this, discovering at last the drain his efforts were putting upon him, Hoover sought to take it easier, and recuperate. This quickly became apparent, and a cry arose:

"He's stalling, Lefty! Go to him! Don't let him get his wind back!"

Locke had no intention of permitting his antagonist to rest, and now he took the aggressive, and kept at it with persistence that wore on Hoover.

Up to this point, Mike Riley had entertained no doubt as to what the end must be, but now uncertainty seized him, followed by alarm as he beheld tokens which seemed to denote that Hoover was becoming a bit groggy.

The Bancroft manager had no wish to see his puissant slabman whipped, for that would leave him no longer the terror he had been to opposing

batsmen; and much of his success as a pitcher had doubtless come through the awe which he had inspired.

"Hey!" croaked Riley suddenly. "I guess this here's gone 'bout fur enough."

But, with his first movement to interfere, he was seized by more than one pair of hands, jerked back, and held.

"Guess again!" cried Larry Stark. "Hoover forced it on the boy, and now he'll have to take his medicine."

"That's right! That's right!" shouted half a hundred voices.

"You bet it's right!" roared a big millman in the crowd. "If this Bancroft bunch tries to meddle now in a square fight, they'll have the whole o' Kingsbridge on top of 'em."

Possibly a free-for-all fight might have broken out at this point, but suddenly Tom Locke's fist fell on Hoover's jaw with a crack like a pistol report, and the Bancroft pitcher's legs seemed to melt beneath him.

Prone upon the trampled ground he sank in a huddled heap, while Locke, lowering his hands at his sides, stepped back and stood looking down at him. A hush came over the crowd. The fallen man made a blind, feeble effort to lift himself,

turned his body partly, then slumped back, his face in the turf, and lay still.

"He's put Jock out!" said some one in an awed and marveling voice.

With a yell, Larry Stark leaped forward and seized the victor's hand. That yell was echoed by the mob.

"Lefty did it!"

"Oh, you, Lefty! Oh, you, Lefty!"

Locke's face was sober and unsmiling, betraying no elation. Satisfied that it was really over, he lifted his eyes, and found himself unexpectedly gazing into the wide blue eyes of a girl who was looking down at him from a carriage round which the crowd was wedged. For a moment they stared at each other, while the cheering continued, and slowly a flush of shame mounted into Tom Locke's cheeks. He turned away.

"Come, Bent," said Janet in a husky voice, "can't we get out of here now? I'm really faint. Please hurry."

CHAPTER XVI

BENTON KING AWAKENS

JANET was pale and silent as King drove into town. Glancing at her, he saw that her lips were pressed together, her smooth brow puckered a bit, and her eyes filled with a strange, thoughtful expression. Her hands tightly gripped the handle of her parasol.

"I'm sorry it happened that way, Janet," he said apologetically. "It was thoughtless of me to get caught in that mob, so that you were compelled to suffer the humiliation of witnessing such a brutal spectacle."

"You were not to blame," she returned, in a low, queer voice. "I begged you to wait. I'm glad I did."

"You're what—glad?" he exclaimed, astonished. "It was not a thing for a girl like you to see and hear."

"Still," she declared, "I am glad I saw it. I know now that any man with an atom of manhood in his make-up may sometimes be compelled to fight."

"That's right," he agreed, "and he can't always pick a gentleman, or a man of his own class, for an antagonist."

She looked at him quickly. "Do you think Tom Locke is a gentleman?"

"Oh, I don't know about that; it's doubtful, considering the company he's with."

"Do gentlemen never play baseball?"

"Certainly—in college games."

"But they *never* play professionally?"

"I wouldn't say that, you know," was his slow answer. "Some college men go in for professional baseball after graduating. Almost always, they need the money to give them a start in some chosen profession or business. But not all college players are gentlemen, by any means; far from it. At Harvard, even though baseball and football players and members of the track team were decidedly popular in a general way, there were none of them in my set, and I didn't see fit to associate with them much."

Even as he said it, he flushed a bit, knowing she, like many others in Kingsbridge, must be fully aware of the fact that his exasperated father had removed him from Harvard in his sophomore year to avoid the disgrace of his suspension, or possible expulsion, because of certain wild esca-

pades in which he had been concerned, along with some others of his own particularly swift set. Nevertheless, he had his standards of deportment and qualifications essential to the gentleman, though, doubtless, it would be no easy matter to make them clear to some strait-laced, narrow-minded persons.

He was nettled by the conviction that Janet was suddenly taking altogether too much interest in the practically unknown Kingsbridge pitcher, who, following his surprising double victory of the day, was surely destined to become a popular idol in the town. He had known Janet three years, having met her at a church sociable in the days when Cyrus King was setting about in earnest, by the construction of his mills, to turn Kingsbridge from a dull, sleepy settlement into a hustling, chesty town. At first she had seemed to be an unusually pretty, vivacious little girl, with somewhat more refinement and good sense than the usual run of country maidens; but that he would ever become genuinely and deeply interested in her had not occurred to him as a remote possibility. Even after he had left college and begun work in the big sawmill, although he found her much matured and developed, and therefore still more interesting, he but slowly came to realize

that she was the possessor of some potent charm, indefinite, elusive, indescribable, which was casting a powerful spell over him.

Not until this day, however, had he realized how firmly this spell had gripped him. It had come upon him as a surprise which he obstinately tried to misinterpret; for why should he, the only son and heir of old Cy King, several times over a millionaire, permit himself to be bewitched past self-mastery by this little country girl, daughter of a broken-down village parson, who had not tried to bewitch him at all? It seemed ridiculous, something to demand self-reproach; for, least of all, when he thought of such a thing, which was rarely, had he fancied himself silly enough to be caught in such a net. Moreover, he knew what stormy anger the knowledge would produce in his father if the knowledge ever came to him.

The truth had stabbed him there upon the baseball field. It had taken the piercing form of a jealous pang, which he had sought to conceal when he saw that Janet was becoming interested in the new Kingsbridge pitcher; and it cut deeper and deeper as her interest grew and developed into out-spoken admiration. He had seen her watching that fierce fist fight, knowing all the while that she was praying that Locke might con-

quer, and, though she had held herself marvelously in hand, he seemed to fathom all the torture and dread which filled her heart. That she should care so much what might happen to a total stranger, even though he were the new-found idol of the Kingsbridge fans, was sufficient to skim the scales swiftly from Benton King's eyes, and leave him confessing to himself, without shame, that she was very dear to him. For, trite but true, that which we desire very much becomes a thousand times more desirable as our chance of possession grows less.

And now, as they drove slowly homeward, something writhed and burned within him at the further evidence of her interest in Locke. He was tempted to speak up boldly and say that there was not one chance in a million that the fellow could be a gentleman; but he had not yet lost his head, even if his heart was gone, and he had sense enough to know that such a course might be the most unwise one he could pursue. So he held himself in check, registering an inward vow that he would see to it that this fellow Locke found as little chance as might be to give him worriment over Janet.

Too soon the little parsonage, a modest story-and-a-half house, one of the oldest in Kingsbridge,

came into view. Too soon they were at the door, and he was helping her to alight. He held her hand to the extreme limit of good taste, held it and pressed it, saying:

"I shall be at church to-morrow. If you don't mind, it would give me pleasure to escort you home after the services."

She looked at him in surprise, her lips parted in an odd little smile, her violet eyes emphasizing her wonderment.

"Why, Bent, you've scarcely attended church half a dozen times since you came home from college. What brings you out to-morrow?"

"You!" he answered, feeling himself thrill and choke a bit. "I'm a heathen, I admit; but I'm coming out to-morrow to worship—you." He had said such things before, to other girls, but he had spoken them lightly, and without a tremor; now little electric vibrations were running along his nerves, and, though he knew that his face was pale, he could feel his swollen heart pulsing hard, and his temples drumming. He had never dreamed that saying such a "little thing" to a pretty girl would come so near unmanning him.

Her surprise had grown, but she was self-possessed. "Thou shalt not worship false gods," she laughed. Then, as if she saw something in his

eyes which made her fear he would go further, she hastily gave her consent: "If you come out to church to-morrow I'll permit you to walk home with me—after Sabbath School. That'll be your reward for listening to father's sermon. Now, for the first time in my life, I feel that I have really done something for the heathen."

Laughing, she ran up the steps of the trellised porch, turning a moment to say good night, framed in an arch of June green vines. Head bared, he gazed at that picture, and found it the fairest his eyes had ever looked upon. There was now in his mind no question, no doubt; he knew.

"Good night, Janet," he said softly. "Until to-morrow, and that will be—a year." He had laughed at silly, lovesick chaps who said things like that; but now, before he knew what he was saying, he had uttered it with all the sincerity of his soul.

CHAPTER XVII

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

THE door of the Reverend John Harting's study was open. In the softened afternoon light which came from the window above his desk, he sat, giving his morrow's sermon the last polishing touches. But when Janet would have slipped past, he heard her light footstep, and called to her. She stopped at the door.

"Come in, my dear," he said, lifting his spectacles to his forehead, and turning from the outspread pages of manuscript. "Would you mind sitting down a moment? I have something I wish to say to you."

He spoke precisely and formally, and even in ordinary conversation he had a touch of that singsong intonation which all old-time ministers affected. A fringe of white locks, carefully combed, added to the somewhat stern, but almost patriarchal, expression of his angular, deeply lined face. It was the fearless face of a good-hearted man, and yet there was something about it indicative of narrowness and bigotry. Such a

face, one fancied, might have belonged to a leader of martyrs.

She came to him, and sat upon the arm of his chair, encircling his neck, and patting his cheek.

"Now, father, dear," she laughed coaxingly, "I hope you're not going to scold. I know you didn't want me to go to the ball game, but I was just dying to go, and Benton invited me, and—"

"He came round here, and cajoled me into consenting, against my will. He is a young man with a most persuasive and flattering tongue."

"I'll not dispute you," she said, thinking of those parting words at the door. "He needed a persuasive tongue to win you over, you are so dreadfully set against baseball. You can't seem to realize that the game itself is really harmless and clean, and two-thirds of the people of this town are crazy over it. They'll be crazier still after to-day, for we beat Bancroft—shut 'em out without a single tally, gave 'em nine beautiful goose eggs. What do you think of that, father?"

He looked a bit puzzled. "What have goose eggs to do with baseball, my dear?"

"Oh," she laughed, "I mean to say that we handed them a beautiful coat of whitewash, and we bingled out a couple of merit marks for our-

selves. The crowd just went crazy when our new southpaw slant artist started the fireworks going in the sixth with a clean wallop, moved up a peg on a sacrifice, pilfered the third hassock, and slid home on a beautiful squeeze that gave us our first count, and—"

"Stop, Janet!" he cried, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"Why, baseball, daddy! I'm simply telling you how we won the game."

"You may be trying to tell me, but you are not doing it simply. 'Coat of whitewash,' 'bingle,' 'southpaw slant artist,' 'clean wallop,' 'third hassock,' 'beautiful squeeze'! My dear, it's dreadful for a young lady to use such language. It is ample evidence of the absolutely demoralizing influence of this game called baseball."

She laughed still more gayly, and again patted his cheek caressingly. "That's simply the idiom of the game, which every true fan understands."

"But you should remember that I am not a true fan, whatever that may mean. I abhor slang, especially from the lips of a refined girl. You know my efforts alone last year prevented the desecration of the Sabbath by this dreadful game, which seems to turn people's heads, and is productive of untold strife and bitterness. What

will be thought now when my daughter is seen attending these games?"

"But they are not playing Sunday baseball, daddy, and I agree that you were quite right in bringing your influence to bear against that, though, as I said before, I hold that there is no harm in the game itself."

"There is harm in whatever produces harm, which is sufficient answer to your argument. And look at the class of men who take part in those games. Would you be proud to associate with them? Would you choose them as friends?"

"No," she confessed; "not many of them; but still there are some really decent ones who play. Larry Stark is one. I know him, and I'm not ashamed of it."

"There may be an occasional exception, but you know the old saying that exceptions prove the rule. Once in a while a respectable young man may be led by necessity to make a business of baseball, but I am sure no such young man will long continue to follow it up."

"Respectable people watch the games. Some of the best people in Kingsbridge were there today."

"Which denotes a deplorable tendency of the times. And you must not forget that this town

has changed from a peaceful country settlement to a place that is rough and crude, and filled with viciousness and vice. I am having a struggle against these evil influences, and I need the moral support of my daughter's example, at least. If your mother had lived—"

"Now, father, please don't! You seem to have an idea that I'm a most reckless, wicked young person, and you always use that form of argument to shame me in my sinful ways. I saw in the grand stand to-day several of the most respectable ladies in town, at least two of whom are regular attendants at your church."

"Some seed must fall on barren ground. I hope young King will not ask you to go with him again. If he comes to me, I shall refuse my consent; if you go, you will do so against my wishes."

With him in this inflexible mood, she knew the uselessness of persuasion or cajolery, and she left him, to run up to her room a few moments before the maid should call them to tea. Removing her hat before the mirror, she pouted a little at the charming reflection in the glass.

"Father is so set," she murmured; "yet I've always been able to bring him round some way, and I must do it about this; for I just can't stay

away from the games. I guess I'm a real fan, all right, and I'll be worse than ever with Kingsbridge winning from Bancroft, and—and Lefty pitching. He's surely what they can call *some pitcher*. And he can fight—gracious!"

She shivered a bit at the recollection of the scene she had witnessed after the game was over. Again she seemed to behold those fighting men hammering at each other with their bare fists, savage, bloodstained, brutal. She shuddered at the remembered glare of their eyes, the wheezing of their panted breathing, and the crushing sound of their blows. From her parted lips came a little gasp, as once more on her ears seemed to fall the clear crack of Tom Locke's fist smiting his foe full on the point of the jaw with such force that Hoover's legs had given way beneath him like props of straw.

"He can pitch, and he can fight," she whispered. "He looks clean and manly, too. I wonder what he's really like. I suppose he must be coarse and vulgar. When father hears about that affair, he'll be far more set against the game than ever, and he's sure to hear, for the whole town must be talking of it now."

While she made her toilet for tea, the clean-cut, determined face of the young pitcher seemed to

haunt her. Vexed by this, she decided to put him resolutely out of her mind.

"I'm like a silly schoolgirl, seeking a hero to worship," she laughed, blushing at her folly. "I'm old enough to know better. Such heroes always have feet of clay. Still, I'd like to think of him as well as I can—as a pitcher; and, to do so, it is wise that I should view him from afar, that his flaws may not be too apparent. I'll take care about that."

Then her thoughts turned to Benton King, and a little frown gathered upon her face. To-day, as they were driving homeward, and especially as they were saying good night at the door, there had been something in his manner and his words that he had never before unveiled to her. Hitherto they had been just good friends—he deferential, in a way—yet free and easy, as such friends might be, with no self-consciousness or constraint; but now, after this, something warned her that it would be changed, even though, as she believed, he had been neither deep nor sincere in what he had felt or said.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, still frowning; "for I like Bent, and he's about the only young man in Kingsbridge I'd care to be really friendly with. I suppose it's been so long since he's had

an opportunity to talk such nonsense to a girl that he just had to try it on some one to keep in practice. But I don't like it, and I'll have to stop it. Next time he tries it, I'll chaff him till he quits. I'll tell him I like Lefty."

She could not have chosen a more certain method of preventing Benton King from quitting.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER

THE sermon was dry and tiresome, old-fashioned and overflowing with "doctrine." John Harting had never made a pretense of sympathizing with the liberality of modern dominies who relied wholly for the saving of souls upon "the message of love." True, he had ceased openly to preach "hell fire," but doubtless he still believed in it, if not as a literal punishment for the sinful hereafter, then as the only adequate synonym of the penalty that should be meted out to the evil-doer who died unregenerate.

He had found that such preaching, instead of attracting and holding congregations, left the pews of the little old church sadly vacant; and the effort to modify his sermons had taken from them the little heart they once possessed, and made them wearisome and soporific.

The day was warm and sunny, and at times faint little grateful breezes, venturing in at the open windows, brought the June odors of flowers, and grass, and green growing things. Birds were

singing in the trees which shaded the church, and away out yonder the river smiled, and the woods beckoned one to cool shadows and mossy glades.

Thoughts of those glades and shadows occupied Janet in her pew far more than thoughts of the sermon. But those were not by any means her only thoughts; once or twice she had ventured an admirably careless and unstudied glance in the direction of two young men who were sitting far over at the side of the church, both of whom were maintaining a commendable and heroic mien of strict attention to the words of the parson.

It was not, however, Larry Stark who had drawn her glances; her eyes had been directed toward the clear profile of Larry's pewmate, concerning whom she was again wondering and conjecturing. On discovering Tom Locke there, she had felt a shock of surprise, yet somehow he did not seem at all out of place, and never was there the faintest token that the experience was for him in any degree novel or unusual.

So absorbed was she in her speculations that presently she was almost startled to find the sermon ended, and to hear her father intoning the first lines of the closing hymn; never before had one of his discourses seemed so short and passed so quickly.

Standing, she sang with the congregation, without recourse to the hymn book. She had a voice that was clear, and sweet, and true, expressive and sympathetic; she was doubly charming when she sang.

In the midst of that hymn she suddenly became self-conscious, and felt the warm color mounting into her cheeks; although she did not see it, intuition or something of the sort told her that *he* had turned to look in her direction.

Following the benediction, she lingered to speak with some near-by friends. Passing down the aisle to the door, she found herself face to face with Stark and Locke, coming across at the rear from the far side. Larry bowed, and she gave him a friendly smile in return.

"I'm glad to see you at our church again this year, Mr. Stark," she said.

"Thank you, Miss Harting," he returned. "I'm afraid I didn't come as often as I should last year. Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Locke, one of our players."

Their eyes met again, but how changed were the circumstances! Still, it was not she alone who remembered, and the flush on his face was no feeble reflection of that upon her own. She murmured something, her lids drooping quickly; in her ears

his voice—strong, fine of timbre, well modulated —sounded pleasantly. She was disturbed by the remarkable behavior of her heart.

Afterward she could not recall what she had said, but she remembered his words accurately. They were few and formal, but they were uttered in that unmistakable way which marks the speech of a man of breeding.

She took particular note of his hands; while they were a bit slender, with long fingers, there was something about them indicative of physical strength, and strength of character, as well. She wondered that a baseball player could have such fine, well-groomed hands; and she had come to believe that the hand of any man tattles the secrets of him to whom it belongs.

After a few moments, the ball players passed out of the church between two lines of children waiting to enter for Sabbath school when the congregation should have departed. Even as she smilingly greeted some of those children, Janet's eyes followed the retreating figure of Tom Locke.

She was a bit startled to hear some one speak to her, and to discover Bent King, hat in hand, at her side. His face was unusually pale, and there was in his eyes something resembling anger. His voice sounded unnatural and harsh.

"I must say those two—er—fellows had their nerve with them!" he observed, in a low tone. "It took a crust for them to stop and speak to you here. I—I felt like punching their heads!"

"I am very glad you did not permit your feelings to master you," she said, with a faint laugh. "I met Larry Stark last year, and I was glad to see him at church to-day. He introduced Mr. Locke, the new pitcher."

"Oh, I saw it all," Bent half growled. "I was standing out here in the vestibule, where I could look inside, and I saw them time their movements to meet you."

"Oh, pshaw! You must be mistaken."

"I'm not—begging your pardon, Janet. I say it was a sheer case of nerve for two hired ball players to do a thing like that. I saw people staring as you were talking to them. I don't wonder you were embarrassed."

"Embarrassed! You must be mistaken, Benton."

"Of course you were embarrassed—you blushed like fire. It was humiliating to be compelled to acknowledge an introduction to a common scrapper like that man Locke."

"I assure you that I did not feel at all humiliated," she returned, with a touch of defiance.

"Instead, I was glad of the opportunity to meet him."

King choked; the pallor of anger gave way to a flush of the same nature, and he gazed at her resentfully.

"You must be jesting," he said, endeavoring to restrain himself. "I hope you're not baiting me."

"Not at all. Ever since the game yesterday I have felt much curiosity concerning Tom Locke. To some extent, it has been satisfied. I admit I was surprised to find him plainly very much of a gentleman."

He bit his lip, his gloved hands gripping and crushing the soft felt hat, and for the moment he was afraid to speak again. Hatred for Tom Locke throbbed in every pulse beat.

She broke the momentary silence: "What are you doing here—now?"

"I am waiting to walk home with you."

"But it is too early. I told you after Sabbath school."

"I'll wait," he said.

"Don't let me put you to that trouble."

"I'll wait," he repeated grimly.

He was waiting at the door when she came forth after Sabbath school was over, and he fell in at

her side. She made an observation about the beautiful day, but his face wore a shadow, and it was of something quite different that he presently spoke.

"I hope, Janet," he said, "that you are not becoming interested in that man Locke?"

"Oh, but I *am* interested in him," she returned, laughing. "How can I help being? He is a wonderful pitcher, and he has shown that he can take care of himself when crowded into a corner. Every one who has seen him must be interested in him."

"You know what I mean, Janet. He is a professional ball player, a stranger, a man whom no one around here knows anything about."

"Oh, Mr. Cope must know a great deal about him, or he'd never signed him for the team. I'd really like to ask Mr. Cope some questions."

"Don't! If you do that, if you're not careful, you'll have people gossiping. You know how easy it is to start gossip in a small country town."

She tossed her head a bit. "Yes, I know; but if they want to gossip over nothing at all, I'll not attempt to deprive them of the pleasure."

"These baseball players," he went on, "always think they can mash any country girl they choose. I understand that they joke and boast of their conquests, and laugh about the silly girls who

get stuck on them. You should have foresight enough—"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. King!" she interrupted frigidly. "You seem to presume that I'm anxious to pick up a flirtation with a baseball player. I assure you that you are mistaken; but, even if you were not, you could not choose a better method of making yourself offensive."

He saw he had made a false step; in vain he tried to remedy the error. She would not quarrel, nor would she discuss the matter further, maintaining silence, save when it became absolutely necessary, out of politeness, to make some answer to what he was saying. Cursing himself for a blunderer, he apologized as well as he could, speaking of their long friendship, and his natural interest in her, which might have led any one into such an indiscretion. At the door of the parsonage they parted, he still humble and penitent, she still cool and formal.

"I'm a fool!" he growled as he strode away. "I should have known better. I *did* know better, but I lost my head when I saw him fawning upon her—when I saw her, poppy-cheeked, looking after him. If he takes a fancy to cut in on my preserves, he'll find the going rough. I'll guarantee he has a vulnerable spot, and I'll locate it."

CHAPTER XIX

THE AGITATION IN BANCROFT

MORE than a hundred men, laborers and mill hands, bearing new brooms, recently bought in grocery stores, and making a tremendous noise with tin horns, cow bells, and voices, were marching down the main street of Bancroft.

They were Kingsbridge fans, who had come down to the city to root for their baseball team, and to back it up, if necessary, should a disturbance start upon the field; and, to the last horny-handed husky, they looked like fellows who would as soon fight as eat; one might have fancied, even, that not a few of them were the sort who would leave a meal any day to take a hand in a healthy, head-cracking scrap.

At any rate, their appearance had been sufficient to serve notice of the cause which had brought them thirty miles by rail on this mid-week day to sit in a bunch on the Bancroft bleachers while the game was in progress.

After the affair in Kingsbridge, which ended with the whipping of Hoover, there had been rumors that the resentful Bancrofters would do things to Locke when he appeared in the city down the river, which had brought out this picked band of Lefty's admirers with the openly proclaimed intention of being concerned in such "doings" as might come off.

The game was over, the Kinks had won again, and there had been no riot. Up to the seventh, it had been another pretty struggle between Locke and Hoover, but when the first Kingsbridger opened that fatal inning with a stinging two-sacker, the local pitcher went up in the air for the first time in the Northern League, being bumped for three earned runs before Manager Riley brought himself to send in a substitute. The game had terminated with the score seven to three in Kingsbridge's favor. Hence the demonstration of the rejoicing visitors, as they marched down through town to take the homeward-bound train.

Mike Riley, chewing at his inevitable cigar, stood on a corner, and sullenly watched the parade. After the game, he had not lingered to say anything to his players, for he knew that his mood would lead him into remarks not at all

soothing or flattering, and mere talk could not remedy what had happened.

Some one grabbed Riley by the elbow, and he looked round, to see Fancy Dyke, accompanied by Rufus Kilgore, a lawyer, who was one of the backers of the Bancroft team. Dyke's thin lips were pressed together, the corners being pulled down into something half sneer, half snarl. The lawyer looked disturbed.

"What're you doing?" asked Fancy. "Standin' here to give them howlin' muckers a chance to see how bad you feel? Where's the police, anyhow? They oughter pinch that whole bunch for disturbin' the peace."

"It would take the whole police force of the city to arrest a single man of them and land him in the caboose," said Kilgore. "Kingsbridge didn't send down a hundred fighting men to see any one of them pinched because he was celebrating a victory over us."

"We was lookin' for you, Riley," said Dyke. "Come on over to Kilgore's office."

"What for?" growled the manager, having drawn back and shaken off Fancy's hand.

"We're goin' to have a consultation; we're goin' to talk this thing over. Jorkins and Butler will be right along. We've told 'em to come."

"What're you tryin' to do—make trouble fer me?" rasped Riley resentfully. "You've got busy mighty quick after the game, ain't ye?"

"It's sure time something was done," retorted Fancy defensively. "This town won't stand for much more of the medicine it had to swaller today."

"That's right," agreed the lawyer. "Everybody is sore over it. To be downed by Fryeburg or Lakeport would be bad enough, but to have Kingsbridge rub it into us—oh, blazes!"

"I don't s'pose you guys got an idea I'm goin' to lay down and let the Kinks keep it up right along?" snapped the manager. "I reckoned you knew I warn't built that way."

"It won't do any hurt to talk over what's to be done," said Dyke. "Come on!"

Riley followed them, scowling blackly. They crossed the street along which the hilarious Kingsbridgers had passed, came to an open doorway two blocks farther on, and mounted a rather dark flight of stairs. Kilgore jingled a bunch of keys attached to a chain, and opened a door bearing his name lettered upon it, at the head of the stairs.

The office consisted of two uncarpeted rooms, the front and larger having windows which looked upon the street. The lawyer flung open one of

those windows, through which drifted distant and dying sounds of the celebrating Kingsbridgers. Then he motioned his companions to chairs, himself taking the swivel in front of his littered, untidy desk.

"Had to let my stenographer off for the game," he said. "She made a bluff that she was half sick and had a terrible headache, but I knew what ailed her, and I cured her by giving her a pass. She'll come back to-morrow feeling worse than ever over our licking."

"Natural enough," said Dyke, sitting down. "It'll make the whole town sick."

Riley's chair cracked under his weight. "Ain't got a swaller of somethin' round here, have ye, Kilgore?" he asked.

The lawyer produced a "longnecker" and a dirty glass. "Running water in the back room if you want it," he said.

But the manager, having no desire to dilute the amber liquid with which he almost overran the glass, and disdaining a "chaser," took his "straight." Dyke followed with a small "nip," but Kilgore asked to be excused from joining them, and put away the bottle and glass.

Heavy steps sounded on the stairs. A tall, slim, sallow man entered, a puffing, red-faced, rolypoly

individual toddling at his heels. These were Timothy Jorkins and Ira Butler, both financial backers of the team, and members of the Bancroft B. B. A.

"Here you are!" said Jorkins, in a deep voice pregnant with accusation, fixing his eyes on Riley.

"Yes, here you are!" gurgled Butler, likewise glaring at the manager.

"Yes, here I am," rasped Mike, returning their gaze. "What about it?"

"What about it?" rumbled the tall man excitedly. "Do you say what about it? Have you the nerve to say what about it? We are the ones to say that. What about it, Mr. Riley; what about it?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Riley, what about it?" wheezed the fat man, digging up a limp handkerchief, and painfully mopping around inside his collar, his face becoming still more beetlike during the process. "That's what we want to know."

Riley removed the cigar from his mouth, and spat on the floor. "You're all wrought up, ain't ye?" he sneered. "Goin' to jump on me good and hard, hey? There's some poor losers in this burg."

"Bancrofters'll never stand losing to Kingsbridge," declared Jorkins. "You were dead cer-

tain their left-hand kid pitcher couldn't repeat the trick he played on us in their town last Saturday, but he did it, and everybody's chewing the rag. If he can keep that up, they'll grab the pennant away from us. They're getting the jump on us at the beginning of the season. It's plain we haven't a pitcher to hold his own with that man Locke. Hoover blew up to-day. Locke got his goat, and he won't be any more use against that team. They'll keep Locke just to run against us."

"Has Bancroft ever had a losin' team with me managin'?"

"No, but—"

"She won't this year, either. Leave it to me. Don't go off your nut so soon."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Butler.

"I ain't had much time to figger on it yet, but you can bet your life that I'll do somethin'."

"I lost a hundred on the game to-day," said Dyke mournfully.

"Where did they get hold of Locke?" questioned the lawyer.

"I don't know," confessed Riley. "Cope dug him up, and he ain't tellin' where. Hutchinson don't know no more about the youngster than we do."

"Perhaps he lies," put in Jorkins. "Perhaps he does know."

"He wouldn't take the trouble to lie about it if he knew, and he told me straight that he didn't know."

"Think his conscience would keep him from lying?" asked Fancy.

"Conscience! If Bob Hutchinson has one, nobody ever accused him of it. But if Locke was his find he'd be taking the credit, you bet.

"Don't nobody think for a minute that I'm goin' to sit round and twiddle my thumbs while Kingsbridge is winnin' games off us. I ain't built that way. We'll down 'em somehow or other, mark that."

"We ought to have a pitcher as good as Locke, at any cost," was the opinion of Jorkins.

"At any cost," agreed Butler. "Why don't we have him?"

"Pitchers of that caliber ain't to be picked off ev'ry bush this late in the season," said Riley. "There's other ways of downin' Kingsbridge."

CHAPTER XX

MEN OF CONSCIENCE!

THERE was a moment's silence. Then Dyke spoke up. "We'll be up ag'inst it hard with our left-hand hitters if they keep on holdin' Locke in reserve for us," he said. "Lisotte, McGovern, Bernsteine, Mace—he's got their number, ev'ry one of 'em. It was pitiful to see them tryin' to hit him to-day."

"Never suffered more at a game in all my life," sighed Jorkins. "Every time a man fanned and those Kingsbridgers howled, I had an attack of heart disease. Then think of them loading up with brooms, and bells, and tin horns, and parading through the main street! It was insulting."

"Insulting!" gurgled Butler. "Wonder they weren't pelted with rotten eggs."

"It would have been unfortunate if they'd caught anybody shyin' rotten eggs at them," said Riley. "They were primed for a ruction, and there'd have been merry blazes to pay. Now, gents, just you calm down, and wait for me to straighten things out. Losin' this game to-day

hit me just as hard as anybody, for I had an idea we'd bag it, dead sure."

"And your confidence, which you expressed unreserved last night, cost me good money," murmured Fancy.

"You've won enough in the past to stand one or two losings."

"I wish you could give us an idea what you propose to do," urged Jorkins.

"I don't mind sayin', confidential, that I mean to do some chinnin' with Bob Hutchinson."

"How is that going to help us?" questioned Butler, in doubt.

Riley winked shrewdly. "Hutch ain't handlin' a team in this bush league from choice, or for his health, and I know enough about him to hang him. He's in a position to muddle things for the Kinks, and, if I have to, I can make him do it. I'll get busy with Hutch to-night. Leave it to me, gents."

"I'd rather beat them on the square," said Kilgore.

"I never knew a lawyer to worry much about the way he won; they'll gener'lly grab at anything that'll land 'em on top. Of course, we'd all ruther trim the Kinks on the level; but we can't let them trim us, no matter what we have to do."

"If we did let 'em," said Dyke, "some of the

crazy ones would feel like handin' us some tar and feathers. I reckon we'll have to leave Mike to fix things; he's on the job."

"Thanks," growled Riley sarcastically. "The way you come at me on the street, I didn't know but you was goin' to demand my resignation from the management."

"Oh, we couldn't get another manager like you."

"Thanks ag'in."

"That's right," nodded the lawyer, "we couldn't. We depend on you entirely."

"But, of course," put in Jorkins hastily, "if you enter into any sort of a deal with Hutchinson, we don't care to know about it. You're engaged to manage the team, and see that it wins; but no member of the association is going to advise you to go out for victory in anything but a legitimate, honest manner. I trust you'll see fit not to come to me with information concerning a deal with this dishonest rascal, Hutchinson."

'And don't tell *me* anything about it," cautioned Butler. "I have a conscience, and I'd feel it my duty to protest."

Riley produced a fresh cigar, twisted off the end with his teeth, and lighted a match. Puffing at the cigar, with the match flaring at the end of

it, he made no effort to mask the faint, sneering smile upon his face.

"You're all men with consciences, I know that," he said. "I wouldn't for the world do a thing to make any of ye lose sleep at night. Go home and rest easy. That's all I have to say." He rose to his feet.

"I'm very glad to hear you speak that way," said Jorkins. "It lifts something of a load from my shoulders."

"Mine, too," said Butler. "I was worried, but I feel better now."

CHAPTER XXI

A SECRET MEETING

AT nine o'clock that night, Bob Hutchinson, smoking, stood on the steps of the Central Hotel, in Kingsbridge, and waited. Presently two men, one stout and heavy, the other slender and quickstepping, came round the nearest corner, and hurried toward the steps. "Well, here he is!" muttered Hutchinson, recognizing the heavy man as Riley.

"Hist!" breathed the Bancroft manager, as he puffed up the steps. " 'Fraid you wouldn't be here. Let's not hang round. Take us up to y'ur room."

"Come on," said Hutchinson, leading the way.

It was not necessary to pass through the hotel office and writing room, where there were a number of loungers, and some drummers. They mounted the stairs, and reached Hutchinson's room without encountering any one.

"Shut the door," said Riley the moment he was inside. "That was lucky. Nobody seen us come here."

"Rather lucky," agreed the Kingsbridge manager, turning the key in the lock. "I'd just as lief not have it known that you're here. I didn't want you to come, but you insisted. How'd you get here?"

"Gas wagon."

"Oh, yes. Where is it?"

"Left it on the outskirts, so's not to attract attention. Give the chauffeur orders to drive off an' come back in an hour."

"I tried to shut you off from coming when you telephoned, but—"

"I was all ready to start. I'd made up my mind to see ye to-night, anyhow. Shake hands with Mr. Dyke, Mr. Hutchinson."

"Very glad to know you, sport," said Fancy; but he dropped Bob Hutchinson's cold hand almost as soon as he touched it. "I think Mike told you over the phone that I was all right."

The Kingsbridge manager shrugged his shoulders. "I don't quite get wise to his reason for saying that. I presume this is nothing but a social call?"

"Social blazes!" growled Riley. "Think I'd ride thirty miles at night just to make a social call, Bob? You know better."

"If you came for any other purpose," said

Hutchinson, "you should not have brought company. That's straight over the pan, Riley."

"Aw, I tell ye Fancy is trusty; needn't be afraid of him."

"I've had some experience," reminded Hutchinson. "You know what I mean. Are you trying to put me in bad in this town?"

"Not a bit of it."

"Of course, I know the result of the game today raised particular thunder in Bancroft. It must have made them gnash their teeth."

"Gnash 'em—you bet!" said Dyke. "There was an awful holler went up."

"Got anything to drink, Hutch?" asked Riley. "It's a bit chilly ridin' to-night."

"You know I do not drink."

"Well, you can order up a round for Dyke an' me."

"I can, but I won't. The boy would see you here, and in twenty minutes the whole town would know it. Sit down, and make yourselves as comfortable as you can without drinks. Here are cigars."

Riley accepted one of the weeds, but Dyke chose to smoke a cigarette. Although they sat down, they plainly were not at ease; there was an atmosphere of suppressed tension in the room.

"Let's git right down to cases," said Riley abruptly. "You know, a place like Bancroft can't afford to let a raw, mushroom burg of this sort beat it out at baseball, or anything else. We're willin' the games should run close, so's to keep the int'rest up, but we've got to feel all the time that we've got somethin' up our sleeves that'll land us sure at the head of the column when the season finishes."

"Go ahead," nodded Hutchinson, as the speaker paused. "Don't mind me."

"I know you well enough, Hutch," pursued the Bancroft manager significantly, "to be dead sure you ain't goin' out and tattle anything I say to you in confidence. Well, our strongest hitters are left-handers, and that southpaw o' yourn bothers 'em. Kingsbridge 'u'd like to win the pennant; but, next to winnin' herself, she'd be satisfied to keep us from coppin' it. Havin' found a pitcher that can hold us down, she'll keep him for that express purpose, no matter how the games with the other teams go. I own up that that pitcher looks like a nasty stumblin' block, and we'd like to git him outer our way."

"We've got to do it!" put in Fancy.

Still cautious about his words before Dyke, Hutchinson made no comment.

"Now," continued Riley, "knowin' you as I do, Hutch, I decided to talk it over with ye. Outside of that guy Locke, you've got a couple of dead ones for twirlers. Deever's arm is on the blink, and Skillings is a has-been. Playin' five games a week, as you do, with only one lay-off besides Sunday, you need three reg'lar dependable pitchers to do the work."

"What are you driving at?"

"Just this: To win from Fryeburg and Lakeport, you've got to use better slabmen than Deever or Skillings. Locke is the only one you've got, and so you'll have to work him in them games. See?"

Hutchinson fancied he saw, but he remained silent.

"Of course," said Riley, "you'll make a bluff of workin' the others, but the minute things look a bit hazy you'll yank 'em out and run Locke in to save the day. Get me?"

"And no man," murmured Dyke, "can do that much pitchin' and keep his flinger in condition to trim Bancroft."

"I see," said Hutchinson frostily, "that you *do* want to put me in bad here. If I overworked Locke that way I'd have the whole town howling like mad dogs. Already I've had instructions

from old Cope to save the youngster for Bancroft."

"But you're manager, ain't ye?" rasped Riley. "Are you goin' to run the team or let an old Reuben like him do it? What did they hire ye for?"

"An inquiry I have put to Cope already."

"Y'u're s'posed to know your business. When a game's goin' to the bad, whether you're playin' with Bancroft or any other team, it's up to you to save it, if ye can, by changin' pitchers. As I said, Locke's the only man you can depend on to win games, so you'll have to use him."

"If I should tell them so," said Hutchinson, "I'd mighty soon get orders to go out after other pitchers."

"Where are ye goin' to get them—now? It's too late; they've all been gobbled up—all the good ones. And even if you should happen to know of one that was all right, you wouldn't *have* to sign him. You could try plenty of 'em no better'n Deever and Skillings, able all the time to explain, if the town kicked, that good pitchers couldn't be had. What d'ye say?"

"I'm not saying a word," replied Hutchinson, with another glance in Dyke's direction.

In a way, although it was far from satisfactory,

Riley accepted this as a tacit agreement to his proposal.

"I'd like to know," he growled, after drawing hard at his cigar, "where old man Cope ever found that fellow, anyhow."

"You're not the only person who is curious about it," said the Kingsbridge manager. "One chap seems to think he knows. A young fellow by the name of King came to me about Locke. He's got an idea in his nut that the boy is a Princeton pitcher by the name of Hazelton."

Riley started as if shot, almost dropping his cigar.

"What's that?" he cried. "Hazelton, of Princeton? Great smoke! It can't be possible!"

"Why not? I should say the youngster is a college man."

The manager of the Bancroft Bullies gave his thigh a resounding slap.

"Great smoke!" he exclaimed again. "If that's right, that old rat Cope beat me to it. Why, I made a proposal to Paul Hazelton myself."

"You did?"

"Sure. Biff Durgin, scout for the Phillies, told me about that kid last December; said he was a sure-enough comer. I wrote Hazelton a letter."

"Then," said Dyke quickly, "accordin' to the

rules of the league, you had the call on this Hazelton, in a way. If Locke is the same guy, you've got somethin' on Cope, and you can make some disturbance about it."

Riley lifted himself to his feet, pulling out his watch and looking at it.

"Twenty-five minutes after," he said. "What time do the stores close here? I might be able to catch the old fox in his den."

"Go for him," urged Fancy Dyke. "That's the stuff! If there's a chance to do it, it's up to you to protest Locke. If you can't take him away from the Kinks, mebbe you can stop him from pitchin' in the league, and that would do the business. Shall I come along?"

"You may as well. If this thing really comes to a meetin' to decide on a protest, I may need a witness to the conversation that'll pass between Cope and me to-night."

Hutchinson was on his feet. "Gentlemen," he said, "I presume it's fully understood that my name is not to be mentioned in the matter. You'll say nothing of your visit to me?"

"Aw, sure not," promised Riley. "We're not lookin' to get you fired; we would ruther see you stay right here as manager of the Kinks. Don't worry, Hutch; it's all right. Let's hike, Fancy."

CHAPTER XXII

RILEY SHOOTS HIS BOLT

HENRY COPE had a habit of closing his store at night himself. On this particular night his clerks had left, and he was lingering in his cramped little office to straighten out his books. A single swinging oil lamp burned dimly in the front of the store. The old man betrayed annoyance as he heard the front door open, and the sound of heavy footsteps came to his ears.

"Now, who wants anything at this hour?" he muttered. "Hello! Who is it? What d'ye want?" He pushed the spectacles up on to his forehead and leaned back from the desk to peer out through the rather dingy office window, seeing two dark figures approaching.

"Evenin', Mr. Cope," saluted Riley, his ample form filling the narrow doorway. "Don't git up. I've just dropped in to have a few words with ye."

"Good evenin', Mr. Riley. This is a surprise. What're you doin' in Kingsbridge at this hour? Howdy do, Dyke?"

"Come up special to see you on 'portant business," returned the Bancroft manager, without loss of time. "It's about your pitcher, Locke. Would you mind lettin' me see the date on your contrac' with him?"

"Hey?" exploded Cope, decidedly startled. "Let you see the contrac'? You've got a nerve! If I had a reg'lar written contrac' with him, I wouldn't show it t' *you*. What're you drivin' at?"

"Then you haven't a contrac'?"

"I didn't say so; I said a written contrac'. Of course, there's an agreement between Locke and me. 'Tain't necessary for it to be in writin'."

"When did you enter into this contrac'?"

"That's *my* business. Hang it, man! d'you think I'm goin' to tell you my business? You've got another guess comin'."

Henry Cope was decidedly warm and wrathy.

"Keep y'ur shirt on," advised Riley. "Mebbe you'll state when you fust entered into negotiations with Locke?"

"Mebbe I will—and, then again, mebbe I won't. What's that to you? You ain't got nothin' to do with it."

"Don't be so cocksure about that. You oughter know the rules and regerlations of the league.

The manager or backers of any team can't negotiate or dicker with a player who is negotiatin' with any other team in the league."

"What of it?"

"What of it!" croaked Mike Riley, twisting his thumb into the glittering infant logging chain that spanned his waistcoat. "Just this: I may have a claim on Tom Locke myself, on the ground of first negotiation with him."

Cope rose to his feet. He was perspiring freely, and the expression on his usually mild face was one of deepest indignation.

"Looker here, you man," he cried. "Just because you're manager of a bullyin' baseball team you can't come here and bully me. I've got a pitcher that can make monkeys of your bunch o' players, and you realize it, so you want to gouge me outer him somehow. But it won't work, Riley—it won't work. You never heard o' Tom Locke in your life till you heard of him pitchin' for Kingsbridge. You never saw him till you saw him right here in this town. Now you come round and make a bluff that you've got a previous claim on him. That's your style, but it don't go in this case."

"I acknowledge," admitted Riley coolly, "that I never heard of Tom Locke before that time."

"Ha! I knowed it!"

"But," said the Bancroft manager, having removed the cigar from his mouth, "I have heard of Paul Hazelton, of Princeton, and I hold fast claim on him, 'cordin' to the rules of the Northern League!"

Riley had shot his bolt, and, judging by appearances, it had struck home. Henry Cope stood dumfounded, his mouth open, some of the color aroused by his wrath slowly leaving his face. His expression was as good as a confession that the Bancroft manager had made no mistake in naming the man.

Fancy Dyke chuckled with satisfaction. The corners of Riley's thick lips were pulled down; his eyes bored Cope mercilessly. After a time, the Kingsbridge man caught his breath, fumbled for his handkerchief, and mopped away the cold perspiration on his face, his hand not quite steady.

"How—how'd you ever git that idea?" he asked weakly. "What ever give ye the notion that his name was Hazelton?"

Riley was thoroughly satisfied; he knew beyond a doubt that he had hit the nail on the head. Returning the cigar to his mouth, he said grimly:

"Did you have a notion you could wool me, old boy? It's my business to know 'bout ball play-

ers, and when I don't know it's my business t' find out. I was negotiatin' with this man Hazelton last December. I s'pose he used my offer to pry a bigger one outer you, which is just what the league rule coverin' the point was made to prevent. That rule was adopted so players couldn't work one manager agin' another; likewise, so one manager couldn't bother another by monkeyin' with players he was arter. We'll fix this up; Kingsbridge can transfer Hazelton to Bancroft."

"Hold on! Hold on!" sputtered Cope desperately. "I ain't said you was right; I ain't acknowledged Tom Locke's name is Hazelton."

"You don't have to," returned Riley; "I *know* it. You can send him down to us in the mornin'. Just to save argument, I'll pay him the same sal'ry you're payin', though I reckon it's more'n I offered him."

He made a move to depart.

"Hold on!" cried Cope again. "You'll never git him. We won't give him up."

"Oh, won't ye? Then you oughter know what'll happen. He won't be 'lowed to pitch ag'in, and the games he's pitched a'ready will be thrown outer the percentage count. You better think it over calm and reasonable, Cope. Good night."

CHAPTER XXIII

LEFTY'S FICKLE MEMORY

THEY left him there, shaking with rage. He heard them laugh outside the door when it had closed behind them, and he lifted and shook both his fists in their direction.

"Ye shan't have him!" he snarled. "I'll never give the boy up! It's one o' Bancroft's mean tricks. They'll do anything to get ahead of Kingsbridge. It's a measly shame they've tumbled to who the youngster is. I'd give somethin' to find out how that happened."

He stopped suddenly, a hand lifted, his head thrown back, his mouth open.

"I know!" he breathed. "That must be th' way it was. Bent King come to me and asked a heap of questions 'bout Lefty—where was he from, how did I find him, was he a college man?—and all that. I didn't tell him nothin', but all the time I had an oneasy feelin' that he knowed more'n was a good thing f'r him to know. If Bent's been and blowed he oughter be shot!"

Henry Cope did not sleep well that night, and

he rose in the morning at an unusually early hour, even for him. When he appeared at the Central Hotel and inquired for Locke, he was told that Tom was not yet up, and did not often get to breakfast before eight o'clock.

"I've got t' see him right away," said Cope. "I'll go up to his room. It'll be all right."

"I wonder what's the matter with him?" said the clerk to a bell hop, when Cope had hurried away up the stairs. "He looks all broke up this morning."

"Mebbe the groc'ry business and baseball is too much for him," grinned the boy. "He's fussin' over the team all the time. What did they hire a manager for? Why don't he let Hutchinson run the ball team?"

Cope knocked twice at the door of a room. After the second knock, a sleepy voice asked who was there.

"It's me," answered the man outside. "It's Mr. Cope. Somethin' important. Got to see ye right away."

In a few moments the door was opened, and Locke stood there, in pajamas, yawning.

"It must be important to bring you around this hour, Mr. Cope," he said, with a sleepy laugh. "Come in."

When the door was closed, the grocer faced the young pitcher. "Hazelton," he said, "why didn't y'u tell me you had been negotiatin' with Riley?"

Much of Locke's sleepy appearance vanished.

"What's that?" he asked sharply. "Negotiating with Riley? What are you talking about? I haven't been negotiating with him. What do you take me for, Mr. Cope? Do you think I would do a thing like that after entering into an agreement with you?"

"I don't mean that you've been dickerin' with him since then, but before. You never told me that Riley had made any proposition to ye to pitch f'r Bancroft this season."

"Who says he did?"

"He says so. He came here last night and stated that he had fust claim on ye, 'cordin' to the rules of the league, which bars any manager from tryin' to git a man another manager is negotiatin' with."

Tom Locke was very wide awake now.

"How could he make any such claim. It is preposterous, Mr. Cope, as you ought to know. I hope you haven't let that man bluff you. Why, he doesn't know who I am!"

"Oh, but he does—that's the thing of it. He

came to my store, 'long with Fancy Dyke, and told me just who you was—called you by your right name."

The younger man sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed, a startled expression on his face. For some moments he stared at the caller, as if at a loss for words.

"I don't understand how he got wise," he finally said slowly. "Called me by my right name, did he?"

"Yep; said he knowed you was Paul Hazelton, of Princeton, and that he was negotiatin' with ye last December. Now, what I want to know is if there's any truth in that statement. If there is, we're in a hole. Did you git a letter from him? Did you write him an answer?"

To the increasing surprise and alarm of Cope, the pitcher seemed to hesitate about replying.

"Did ye? Did ye?" cried the older man impatiently. "Why don't ye answer? You know whether you got such a letter or not, don't ye? You know if ye answered it? What's the matter? Answer! If you done that, we're in a hole. They've got it on us. And to think of that, just when we was holdin' the best hand over them! Speak up, boy!"

"I am trying to think," said Locke.

"Tryin' to think! Look here, you told me you'd never done anything like this before—you'd never played baseball f'r money. Now anybody'd s'pose you'd had so many offers you couldn't remember 'bout 'em. You was mighty partic'lar to have it 'ranged so nobody'd be likely to find out who you was."

Lefty smiled a bit ruefully.

"Apparently all that precaution was wasted," he said. "I give you my word, Mr. Cope, that I have no recollection of ever receiving a letter from Mike Riley, and I am doubly certain that he holds no communication from me. You know I did not send you a written answer to your proposition. A college pitcher who wrote such letters, and signed them with his own name, would prove himself a fool. He'd never know when the letter might bob up to confound him. It would be evidence enough to get him dropped from his college team in double-quick time. No, I am positive I never wrote to Riley."

Cope breathed somewhat easier, although he was still very much disturbed.

"Then, even if he writ to you, there wasn't no negotiations, for it takes two parties, at least, to enter inter negotiations. He'll find he can't bluff me on that tack."

"Give me time—all I ask is a few days—and I can answer positively whether or not he ever wrote to me."

"That don't make no diff'runce, if you didn't answer it. He'll find he's barkin' up the wrong tree when he tries to bluff me outer a pitcher that fashion."

"I presume there will be more or less publicity over this contention, and that'll be unfortunate—for me."

"Yes, I'm worried over that. Riley'll be sure to let ev'rybody know that you're Hazelton, of Princeton, though mebbe it won't git outside the Northern League to bother ye when you go back to college."

"Maybe not, but the chances are that it will, if Riley makes much of a roar over it."

"But you won't quit?" cried Cope, in sudden panic. "If he tries to frighten ye out by threatenin' to blow the matter broadcast, you won't let him drive ye that way? Great Scott! That would fix us! It would be almost as bad as havin' to give ye up to them."

"I am not much of a quitter," answered the other man, with a smile. "It will be a mighty bad thing to have the facts made public; but, once I've set my hand to anything, I seldom turn

back. I don't think you need to worry about losing me, Mr. Cope."

The storekeeper rushed forward and seized the young pitcher's hand.

"Good f'r you!" he spluttered. "That's the stuff! We'll hold Bancroft's nose right to the grindstone; we'll put the wood to 'em this year. But I'm mighty sorry, on your 'count, boy; it'll be tough if you're really chucked off your college team."

"Well, we won't worry about that," laughed Locke, rising and returning the hearty handshake. "We'll have to take things as they come. It'll give me additional satisfaction now to down Bancroft. I have a personal feeling about it."

CHAPTER XXIV

A MATTER OF VERACITY

NEAR eleven o'clock that forenoon, Henry Cope saw Benton King passing his store. Immediately he hurried out, calling to the young man.

"Hey, Bent!" he cried. "Want to see ye a minute. Come back here, will ye?"

King came back.

"What's the matter, Mr. Cope? You seem somewhat disturbed."

"Come inter my office, won't ye? I want to ask you a few questions. 'Twon't take long."

King glanced at his watch. He was wearing a woolen shirt and his ordinary mill clothes, but even in such common toggery he was a rather handsome young fellow.

"All right," he said; "I've got ten minutes to spare."

He was speculating a bit as he followed the storekeeper into the cramped private office.

"Set down," invited Cope.

"I prefer to stand, if you don't mind."

"All right. I'll come right to the p'int. I s'posed you was ruther interested in our baseball team, and I didn't cal'late you'd do anything to hurt it."

"You were quite right," said Bent.

"Well, if that's the case, why have you been tellin' that Tom Locke is a college pitcher from Princeton? Why did you go and put such a notion into the noddles of the Bancrofters? What made you give Mike Riley such an idea?"

The young man frowned.

"Who says anything of the sort? I have never mentioned this fellow you call Locke to Riley, or any other Bancroft man. I wish you would explain how you got the impression that I had."

Cope told of Riley's visit and his threat, Bent listening with great interest, which the expression of his face indicated.

"You're the only person 'round here," the storekeeper concluded, "who has said anything about Tom Locke bein' anybody 'cept what he calls himself. You come to me and tried to pump me 'bout him. You said you'd got the notion that Locke was Hazelton, of Princeton. Now, somebody put Riley onter that, and if it wasn't you, who was it?"

"I'm unable to answer your question, Cope;

but I assure you that it was not I. But it is quite evident that I was not wrong in believing I knew Mr. Locke; he *is* Hazelton, of Princeton—isn't he?"

"Now, that don't have nothin' to do with it. I told ye before when you asked me that you'd have to go to somebody else to find out."

"Which was practically a confession that I had scored a bull's-eye. I was right."

Cope puckered his face and rapped impatiently on his desk with his knuckles.

"Well, now, s'pose you *was* right, do you want to make a heap of trouble for the team by publishin' it and gittin' us mixed up with Bancroft in a fuss over him? Was that your objec'? Is that the way you help your own town team to down them Bullies?"

"Hardly. I had quite a different object, believe me. What it was does not concern you at all, Cope; it's my own affair. However, if the fellow has been using Bancroft as a cat's-paw to help him squeeze Kingsbridge for a fancy salary, it will serve him right if he gets it in the neck, and finds himself barred from both teams. That's the way I look at it."

Cope sprang to his feet excitedly, almost choking in the effort to utter the words which rushed

to his lips. He was mightily disturbed, and, as usual when overwrought, he perspired freely.

"But he says he never done nothin' of the sort, and he wouldn't lie."

"Wouldn't he?" said Bent, with a faint sneer. "Why not?"

"Because he's an honest young feller—honest and square as a brick."

"How do you know that? Let me tell you, Cope, that a college man who will play summer ball for money, under a fictitious name, is not honest; and such a fellow wouldn't choke a little bit over a lie."

"Y'u're wrong 'bout this chap—dead wrong; he's on the level."

"He may be," admitted King, preparing to depart; "but I have my doubts. I wouldn't trust him out of sight. Why, such a man might double cross you any time. He can be bought and sold. It may be a very good thing for the team to dispense with his services."

Having said this, he left the office and the store, heedless of some parting words from Cope, who was far more agitated than he had been before the interview.

There was triumph in Benton King's heart, for the last shadow of uncertainty regarding the

identity of Kingsbridge's star pitcher had vanished. He had felt before that he was on the right track, but now he was positive about it; Henry Cope's refusal to answer his point-blank question had been admission enough.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TEST AND THE DENIAL

AT the post office, as he had hoped, King met Janet. Since Sunday, he had scarcely caught a glimpse of her, but he knew she sometimes came for the mail near that hour, and the knowledge brought him there from the mill. As she was leaving, he joined her, making an excuse to walk in the same direction.

They chatted about various trivial things, Janet seeming quite light-hearted. He, however, was troubled; he wished that she would speak of baseball, which would make it easier for him to introduce the matter that was on his mind. Coming in sight of the parsonage at last, he decided to delay no longer.

"I understand," he said abruptly, "that Kingsbridge's great pitcher, Locke, is in trouble."

"In trouble?" she exclaimed, surprised. "How?" The undisguised depth of her interest, and her all too apparent alarm, gave him a stab of anger.

"Oh," he answered, with pretended careless-

ness, "it has just leaked out that he played a rather slick two-handed game with Bancroft and Kingsbridge, and Mike Riley is making a holler about it. He professes to hold first claim on the man. If so, this town will lose the mighty southpaw."

Her alarm became almost panicky.

"I don't understand, and I don't believe a word of it. It's only another of Riley's tricks. How can he have any claim on Lefty?"

He explained.

"Oh," said Janet, "is Lefty really and truly a college man? I felt sure he could not be just an ordinary professional player. He seems far too refined and well bred."

"He's a college man, all right. He looked familiar to me at first sight, but I was not sure I had seen him before. His name is Hazelton, and he did some pitching for Princeton this year, but I don't think he was a regular on that team until the end of last season. I suppose he thought that, coming away up here in the bush, he could get by under a fake name without being found out. They're wise to him, however, and now he's in bad. It should end his career as a college pitcher."

"That would be a shame!"

King shrugged his shoulders.

"Why so? A college player who goes into the game professionally deserves no sympathy if exposed. He's crooked, and he has no right ever again to appear on his college nine."

"I don't believe Lefty would do anything crooked," she declared stoutly. "He has an honest face. You're prejudiced against him, Bent."

"It isn't prejudice," was his defense. "The facts speak for themselves. If he is Hazelton, of Princeton, playing here under a false name, he's dishonest."

"Then I don't believe he is Hazelton, at all."

They had stopped at the cottage steps.

"I have wired for proof," he said grimly. "I did so Monday, and I'll know positively before long. Already, however, I am quite satisfied; for if the man isn't Hazelton why should Riley make such a claim? And why doesn't Henry Cope deny it?"

"I didn't think it of you!" she cried, her face flushed and her eyes scornful. "I didn't think you would do such a thing, Benton King."

"I wished to satisfy myself regarding the man's honesty," he explained, still standing on the defensive. "I had no intention of making public

such knowledge as I might obtain about him. I'll own up that I did mean to tell you, for I wished you to know just what sort of a person he is. You're altogether too interested in him, Janet, and I care too much for you to see you fooled by a fellow of his character."

She tossed her head.

"I think your motive was purely personal."

"Janet!" he exclaimed reproachfully.

"I can't help it! I can't help thinking so! I won't believe Tom Locke is deceptive, dishonest, crooked; and it seems that is what he must be if he, a college man, is playing here for money under a false name."

"Just so. And, as he happens to be coming down the street this minute, we'll put him to the test. Will you let me ask him a few questions before you?"

She had turned swiftly to look; her face lost some color as she saw Locke, accompanied by two other players, all in uniforms, coming that way. They had been at the field for morning practice, and, after making a cut across lots, were following that street back into town.

As Janet hesitated, doubtful, and ready to hurry into the house, King again sought permission to interrogate the man while she listened.

"If you will leave it to me," he promised, "I'll not embarrass you by giving him reason to believe we have had a discussion about him."

"Very well," said the girl faintly, standing her ground.

Locke and his companions lifted their caps as they drew near, and Bent, unsmiling, lifted his hat. In a cold voice, he called:

"O, Locke, I say, would you mind stopping a moment?"

A flicker of surprise passed over Lefty's face. He stopped, and his companions went on.

"How do you do, Mr. Locke?" said Janet, in a voice which she tried hard to keep steady.

"I didn't see you at the game Tuesday, Miss Harting," said the pitcher.

"I wasn't there. I should have enjoyed it, but father is opposed to the game, and objects to my attending."

"You will be missed."

King's teeth clicked, and the frigid expression on his face was blotted by a hot frown. He measured Locke with his eyes, getting for the first time the impression that the man was far better set up than he had supposed, and not quite as slender. Also, he was struck by the conviction that Locke was older than he had fancied; although his face

looked somewhat boyish—particularly so at a distance, upon the baseball field—upon closer inspection it appeared more manly and seemed to possess a certain sort of dignity. Surely there was nothing common or ordinary about the fellow.

"Pardon me, Locke," said Bent, "but—do you know?—you've puzzled me a bit!"

"Really? In what manner?"

"At first sight of you, last Saturday, I felt that I had seen you somewhere before. I'm sure of it now."

"I don't recall ever having seen you outside of this town."

"That's not strange. I'm not a baseball player, although I am a Harvard man. Yes, there's no doubt about it, I have seen you."

"When?" asked Locke, as if the question came from unwilling lips. "Where?"

"At Cambridge," asserted King, keeping his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the other man's face, "a year ago this past spring, when Princeton played Harvard. You did not pitch, but you were on the Princeton bench."

There was a hush, in which Bent, still keeping his eyes fixed on Locke's face, could hear Janet breathing quickly through her parted lips. His heart leaped, for Lefty was faltering, and it

seemed that the girl must perceive the faint shade of dismay that passed over his face.

"I think you are mistaken," said the pitcher, breaking the silence at last.

King laughed.

"You *think* so! Really? Then perhaps you will deny that you were there?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I deny it."

"Do you mean to say you were not there?"

"I was not there."

Swiftly lifting his hand, Benton pointed a level, accusing finger like a pistol at Locke's face.

"Perhaps," he cried, "you will make an additional denial. Perhaps you will deny that you are Paul Hazelton, of Princeton?"

Janet leaned forward, her hands clasped, her blue eyes full of suspense. So much depended on the forthcoming answer! If he were to confess that he had been named by King, she felt that henceforth she must hold him in disdain as being all that Benton had asserted he was. But if he should deny it— His lips parted to reply:

"Most certainly I deny it! I am not Paul Hazelton, of Princeton."

The girl uttered a little cry of joyous relief:

"There, there! You see—you see, you were mistaken, Bent. I knew—I knew you must be! I knew it could not be true. I was sure Lefty—he—Mr. Locke wouldn't do a thing like that. I'm so glad!"

But, although surprised by the man's nerve, Benton King was not jostled from the perch of belief on which he had settled. He had thought that the fellow, fairly cornered, would not dare to make a point-blank denial. It seemed, however, that Locke had elected to play the hand out, even with the leading trumps against him. He turned and smiled into the blue eyes of the rejoicing girl.

"And I am glad to know you felt so sure I wouldn't do a thing like that. I trust your confidence in me may never waver."

"For real, pure bluff," thought Bent King, "that's the limit! But it's a losing game. He's fouled himself now for fair."

Getting his breath, he spoke aloud:

"It's strange I should make such a mistake, Mr. Locke—very strange. Of course, I know that many college players go in for summer ball on the quiet. Just to satisfy my own curiosity, I've sent for some information concerning Paul Hazelton, who made a record by pitching and winning two of Princeton's big games recently. Of course, as

you say you are not Hazelton, I might have spared myself the trouble. Still, if the friend to whom I sent can get hold of a picture of Hazelton, it will be amusing to make a comparison between that likeness and yourself, just to see how strong the resemblance may be. I have an idea that Hazelton is almost your perfect double."

"It would be rather odd, wouldn't it, if it should prove so?" smiled Locke coolly. "Still, such things sometimes happen. I think I'll hustle along to the hotel. Good morning, Mr. King. Good morning, Miss Harting. I trust I'll soon have the pleasure of seeing you again at the games."

They stood there and watched his retreating figure until he passed from view round a corner. Janet's face, though showing satisfaction, was a bit haughty and accusing as she spoke to Bent.

"I hope you realize now," she said bitingly, "that you have made a big blunder."

"No," he returned, "it was that man Hazelton who made the blunder in denying his identity."

"Why—why, do you still think—"

"I haven't the slightest doubt in the world—he is Paul Hazelton. I'll prove to your satisfaction, Janet, that he is not only dishonest, but a most contemptible liar, as well."

CHAPTER XXVI

WAS IT A BLUFF?

KINGSBRIDGE was to play at home that day, with Lakeport. It being the middle of the week, the crowd on hand at the hour for the game to begin was not more than one-third as large as the average Saturday attendance.

The enthusiasm aroused by the two clean victories over Bancroft, however, was sufficient to bring out nearly every interested Kingsbridger who could come; and many who knew they should not do so came, temporarily neglecting their business. Soothing a troubled conscience is often the task of the howling fan on the bleachers, and if games were never attended save by those who feel that they have a perfect right to attend, the gate receipts would dwindle frightfully.

Henry Cope arrived as the locals were getting in the last round of practice before the contest started. Hutchinson had his eye out for the storekeeper, to whom he beckoned at once, rising from the bench.

"Well," said Cope, as he came up, flushed, "how's things lookin' to-day?"

"All right, as far as this game is concerned," replied the manager, in his unenthusiastic way; "but I have something in my pocket that's got me guessing."

"Hey? What is it?"

"A letter from Mike Riley, received to-day noon."

"Oh, is that so?" snapped Cope, instantly deciding that he knew something as to the tenor of that letter. "Well, what's that bullyraggin' bluffer got to say? Lemme see it."

"I'll show it to you later, when we're not quite so conspicuous. I can state the gist of its contents accurately, for I've read it over several times. Riley asserts that, according to Rule Fourteen of the by-laws of the Northern League, he holds first and undisputable claim to the pitcher who has been working for us under the name of Tom Locke."

"The dratted snake!" rasped the storekeeper. "He can't gull me! There ain't nothin' to it, Hutchinson, so don't you let him git ye on a string."

"Are you sure there's nothing to it? He demands that we surrender the man to Bancroft at

once, and says he has already notified you of his claim."

"Oh, yes, he's notified me, in a way; and I practically told him where he could go. It's a put-up job to gouge us out of a pitcher that's got the whole o' Bancroft scared pea green. We've got 'em goin', and they're afraid they can't beat us on the level, so, arter their usual style, they put up a job to weaken us by stealin' our pitcher. That's Bancroft out an' out, and Mike Riley's a good tool to work the trick for them; but he can't work it—he can't, I tell ye!"

"Doubtless you know more about the merits of the case than I do," said Hutchinson calmly; "for you signed this man who calls himself Locke. Riley says Locke is a Princeton College pitcher by the name of Hazelton. How about that?"

"Riley thinks he's wise," returned Cope evasively, "but mebbe he don't know as much as he's got a notion he does. Anyhow, whether Locke is Hazelton or not, I'm dead sure Bancroft ain't got no legal claim to him."

"I hope you're right, of course, for Locke seems to be a fairly good pitcher."

"Fairly good—*fairly!* Why, he's a ripper, a bird, a wonder! His match ain't never pitched the horsehide in these parts."

"Perhaps not; we won't argue about that. From his letter, I should judge that Riley really means to put up a fight for Locke, or Hazelton, whichever you choose to call him. He states that, unless the man is immediately released to him, he will make a formal protest to Anson Graham, president of the league, and he has requested me to call the attention of the directors of our local association to the matter."

"Nothin' but wind. He won't push it, for he ain't got a leg to stand on."

"He likewise states that, in case we use Lefty again, the protest will contain a request that all games in which Locke plays on any Northern League team except Bancroft shall not be reckoned in the percentage record of such a team. Now, Mr. Cope, if he does push this thing, and the decision should go against us, it would knock the stuffing out of our standing in the league. We are also warned not to use Locke again until the question is settled. Unless you know beyond the shadow of uncertainty that Bancroft can't establish her claim, we'd better hurry the matter to a settlement, or keep Locke on the bench."

Henry Cope was greatly wrought up.

"Keep him on the bench! That's just what Riley'd like to frighten us inter doin'. If he

could only scare us so we wouldn't dast use Locke for a while he'd have the laugh on us, whether he proved his case or not. He's full o' tricks as an egg's full o' meat."

"Well, until the matter is settled, I think we'd better use Locke as little as possible. I don't believe it would be advisable, under any circumstances, to run him into this game to-day."

"This game! I should say not! We've got other pitchers for games like this. We'll keep Locke special to down Bancroft. If we can't hold our own with the rest of the teams with the pitchers we've got, we'll git more pitchers."

The umpire was ready, and the game was on the verge of starting, so Hutchinson returned to the bench.

Despite his outward boldness, Henry Cope was troubled, for it began to seem that Riley really meant to press his claim, an action that would be foolish unless he could back it up with proof. The grocer sought Tom Locke, and drew him away from the bench.

The young man listened to Cope's words, frowning a little, the blood slowly mounting into his cheeks.

"They seem determined to make as much trouble for me as possible," he said. "I have a feel-

ing that Hutchinson doesn't like me too much, and there is another individual in town who is doing his prettiest to stir things up. Benton King is the chap I mean. He has sent for a photograph of Paul Hazelton."

"Has he? Well, what d'ye think o' that? See here, Bent's ruther smashed on the parson's daughter. You ain't been cuttin' in on his preserves, have ye?"

"I scarcely know the girl," answered Locke; but the flush in his cheeks deepened. "Mr. Cope, consider that I've been in this town only a few days."

"I know that, but some o' you baseball fellers are pretty swift with the gals. They generally git their pick in towns like this, for the gals go smashed on 'em right off. Still, Janet Harting ain't just that kind; she's a fine little lady, and she wouldn't pick up with no stranger in a hurry, whether he played baseball or not."

"I'd scarcely fancy her foolish or forward. She appears to be a very nice girl, indeed."

"They don't grow none better, boy. She's all right, though her father'd put an everlastin' end to baseball, if he could have his way. You're dead sure this man Riley ain't got nothin' on ye?"

"I'm practically sure of it. He's bluffing, Mr.

Cope, and he'll lay down when he finds he can't drive you."

There was something in the way this was said, however, that left a vague uneasiness in the grocer's mind. "Practically sure," he muttered, as he sat on the bleachers, scarcely paying any attention to the run of the game. "Why ain't he dead sure? It's mighty odd that he should be at all onsartin on that p'int."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ITEM IN THE NEWS

THE match did not progress favorably for Kingsbridge. For five innings, Skillings fought hard to hold his own, but the "Lakers," as the Lakeport team was called, seemed to have his measure, and Hutchinson notified Stark to substitute Deever in the sixth, the score standing 7 to 5 in favor of the visitors when the change was made.

Deever took it up with reluctance, for his sore arm would not permit him to throw anything but a "lob ball." That slow teaser, however, bothered the Lakers for a while; but in the eighth they began to time it right, and drove in three more tallies, which clinched the game. Cope heard a man near him complaining.

"Lefty could have saved it if Hutch had put him in," declared the dissatisfied one. "He's the only real pitcher we've got. Skillings belongs in the discards, and Deever hasn't got anything left in his sleeve."

"But we can't pitch Lefty all the time," re-

turned another man. "We'd be fools to work him too much. We're holding him back for the Bullies. He's got that bunch measured, and they're pie for him."

When the game was over and the regretful crowd was passing slowly out through the gates, Cope sought Hutchinson.

"We've got to have another pitcher," he said.

"Is that so?" said the manager. "I saw you talking with Lefty. Is he frightened out? Is he going to quit the league, or will he go to Bancroft?"

"He won't do neither!" rasped Cope. "And he ain't frightened. I say we've got to have another pitcher because it's plain that Lefty's the only real first-class twirler we own."

"Skillings will be all right when he rounds into shape," asserted Hutch. "I didn't sign Deever."

"Well, I did—and he's as good as Skillings. Neither one of them ain't got the goods. Do you know of any good pitcher we can get hold of in a hurry?"

"Such a man will be hard to find late in June."

"But we've got to find him!" came grimly from Cope's lips. "No matter what price we have to pay, we've got to have another top-notch slabman. If you can't find him—"

"I presume," cut in Hutchinson coldly, "that I can find him if he is to be found."

"Then git busy. Make the wires hot! This town is out to win this year, if it goes bankrupt, and we ain't goin' to be held down by tricks, lack of pitchers, or anything else."

"No doubt it will be wise to get a line on another man right away, as we'll be in a hole if Bancroft can back up her claim to Lefty. How did he take it when you told him what was going on?"

"Never turned a hair. He ain't worried."

"Isn't he? Well, I'd be if I were in his place —that is, if I wanted to pitch college baseball any more. This rumpus over him is bound to be his finish in that line. It isn't my funeral, but I think he's a fool not to hush it up if he can. It's sure to get into the newspapers, and then the Princeton nine will bid good-by to Lefty Hazelton. They'll have no more use for him."

Shortly after breakfast, Saturday, Bob Hutchinson rapped on the door of Tom Locke's room, and was invited to come in. He entered, bearing a newspaper in his hand, and found Locke writing at a small desk furnished by the hotel proprietor on particular request.

"Good morning," said Tom, evincing a shade

of surprise at the call. "Have a chair." He put aside the pen, and turned his own chair from the desk.

"This unfortunate contention over you," Hutchinson said, "seems to be creating considerable disturbance. To say the least, it's annoying."

"I quite agree on that point," nodded the pitcher, "and it is far more annoying to me than it can possibly be to any one else."

"I should think it might be, although I wish to state that it has jarred me some. I'd like to know whether we have a good claim to you or not. Have you seen the Bancroft *News* this morning?"

"No."

"Here it is. You'll find something of interest concerning you here in the sporting department."

He handed over the newspaper, indicating the article mentioned, and sat down. Not once did he take his cold eyes off Locke's face as the latter read the piece pointed out.

The *News* has learned that a warm controversy is in progress over a certain remarkable young left-handed pitcher who has created a decided sensation by his phenomenal slabwork for one of Bancroft's strong rivals in the Northern League. The man in question is said to be a college pitcher who is playing under an assumed name, this discovery being made by our astute manager, Mr. Riley, who is certainly on the job every minute. To put one over on Michael Riley it is neces-

sary to catch him napping, and the sleepless-eyed sleuth of yellow fiction is a Rip Van Winkle compared with Mike.

In ferreting out the identity of this young southpaw wizard, our manager found that the dangerous twirler who has twice humbled the hard-hitting "Bans"—we prefer this abbreviated familiar name for the team, although it is commonly known by another—is a prominent college star with whom Riley was negotiating as long ago as last December, and, as there is a league rule forbidding any team in the organization to dicker with a player who has made overtures to, or entered into correspondence with, another team, Mike lost no time in asserting his claim to this man. The team that has the coveted man, however, is naturally quite reluctant to give him up, and it seems now that the case must be settled by a meeting of the league directors, which will probably be called some time next week.

Doubtless the publicity which this contention must produce will be very annoying to the young pitcher, and it may have a disastrous effect upon his standing as a college athlete; for the college man who is known to compete for money in baseball or any other sport becomes rated as a professional and is barred from college games. Nevertheless, more sympathy would be felt for the man had he not played the management of one Northern League team against another to his own advantage in the matter of salary. Should exposure and disbarment from amateur sports follow, there are some who must feel that he has only himself to blame.

Locke made no effort to hide his annoyance. "I doubted if Riley would carry it this far," he said warmly.

"Why not?" questioned Hutchinson unemotionally. "You couldn't expect him to hold back on account of what might happen to you at college. Any bush-league manager will give a college

player every protection possible under ordinary circumstances, but there is nothing ordinary about this case, and you've certainly put yourself in bad by the course you have pursued. If I had a claim on a coveted player, similar to that which Riley professes to hold on you, I'd surely push it to the limit."

"I don't know whether or not I have made the statement to you personally," said Lefty grimly, "but I will tell you now that Mike Riley has no claim whatever upon me."

"How about the letter he says you wrote him last December, in response to his offer?"

"If such a letter was written him, it was a declination of the offer, and therefore put an end to negotiations. A man can't be bound to a manager by any rule simply because he writes refusing the offer."

"Not unless that refusal is, on its face, a suggestion or a proposition that a higher offer might be considered. In the latter case, negotiations would still be pending. Do you assert that your letter to Riley gave him to understand distinctly that you would not take any offer from him into consideration, Hazelton?"

"I have not said that I ever wrote Riley a letter, or ever received one from him; and while I am

in Kingsbridge I prefer to be called Locke, not Hazelton."

"Oh," said Hutchinson, "of course we'll humor you in that whim, although you must know that your real identity cannot be kept secret after this. I don't suppose you'll deny that Hazelton is your proper name?"

"I have said that I prefer to be called Locke."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GAGE FLUNG DOWN

HUTCHINSON laughed in a mirthless manner, no sound escaping his thin lips. The young man had refused a direct answer, and nimbly made his escape from the corner in which Hutch had tried to pin him, but it seemed that he might as well have owned up without squirming.

"It's a peculiar affair," said the manager, after a few moments, during which Lefty sat frowning at the newspaper he still held in his hand. "Riley proposes to protest against the counting of any games we may win with you pitching. It seems that old man Cope is getting cold feet, for he has instructed me to fish up another pitcher or two without delay, and I've got some lines out already."

The pitcher lifted his eyes and gazed steadily at Hutchinson, as if looking straight and deep into the hidden chambers of the man's mind, there to read his secret thoughts and purposes. In spite of himself, Hutch felt his icy self-control

melting; in spite of himself, he betrayed resentment; and there was—amazingly—a touch of warmth in the question he fired at Tom Locke:

"Well, what's the matter? I don't suppose you have an idea that we're going to drift along and do nothing, in the face of the possibility of losing you and having the games you've pitched thrown out?"

"I was wondering," said Tom quietly, "just how deeply you were interested in the baseball welfare of Kingsbridge. Somehow, I can't help fancying that it wouldn't disturb you much if I got it in the neck, and had to quit or go to Bancroft."

Hutchinson sneered.

"Haven't you got a touch of the swelled nut? Do you think you're the only pitcher in the business? Winning those two games from Bancroft must have puffed you up aplenty."

"I have won games before I ever came here, or I couldn't have won those games," was the retort. "I know you are only a hired manager; but, as long as you are taking Kingsbridge money for your services, it's up to you to give Kingsbridge your very best interest and effort."

The manager rose, the blaze that had flared strangely a moment before having sunken to cold

ashes of resentment. He had not liked this young fellow from the first; now that Locke had dared speak out in such a fearless manner, indicating the ease with which he had plumbed the shallow depth of Hutchinson's loyalty, the man's hatred became intense. Nevertheless, he sought to resume his habitual mask of cold indifference.

"I've seen plenty of young cubs like you," he said in his usual level, colorless voice. "They always have to have it hammered out of them, and you'll have to swallow the regular medicine if you play much professional baseball."

The gage had been flung down between them; henceforth, although they might dissemble before others, they would make no effort to deceive each other regarding their feelings. If Lefty were really ambitious to get on professionally, it would seem that he had perpetrated a shortsighted piece of folly in incurring the enmity of his manager. Nevertheless, rising to his full height to face Hutchinson, he had something further to say:

"Doubtless, sir, there are other managers like you; but, for the good of the game, I hope there are not many."

For something like thirty seconds, Hutch did not stir or move his eyes from Tom Locke's face; but he was confronted by a pose equally statue-

like and a gaze even steadier and unflinching, and presently, struggle against it though he did, his lids drooped.

"You shall regret those words," he declared, without altering his tone a particle. "Your baseball career in the Northern League will be short; at Princeton it is ended."

He went out, leaving behind him the paper he had brought.

When he was alone, Lefty took a long breath.

"You are right," he muttered; "at Princeton, it is ended." And he laughed queerly.

Hutchinson left the hotel to get the air, which he seemed to need. A man who had never known what it meant to feel deep and lasting affection for any human being, he could hate with an intensity as deep and dark as the Plutonic pit. Seeking a private booth at the central telephone station, he called up Mike Riley, with whom he made an appointment to "talk over business," guarding his words, lest the girl at the switchboard, listening, should hear something her tongue could not refrain from tattling. This done, Hutch walked a while, and felt better.

He was, of course, not the only one who had read the disturbing piece in the Bancroft *News;* already numerous people in Kingsbridge were dis-

cussing that item, which provoked no small amount of alarm, and caused Henry Cope to be bombarded all that forenoon with questions he could not, or would not, answer, putting him before midday into such a reek of perspiration that he felt as if he had taken a plunge in the river.

With a copy of the paper in his pocket, Benton King lingered a few minutes at the post office, and was rewarded by the appearance of Janet. He showed her the paper, and saw her cheek pale as she read the brief article.

"That ought to convince you," he said.

"It does not!" she exclaimed, handing back the paper. "It is a wretched slur, such as might be expected from Bancroft."

"Where there's smoke, you know."

"I'm truly ashamed of you, Bent. I thought better of you."

He flushed under the stinging remark, but stood his ground.

"You will be forced to believe, in the end, Janet."

"As long as Mr. Locke has denied that he is Paul Hazelton, I shall believe him. He has the eyes of an honest man. He has the face of a man who cannot lie."

"I confess that he is an excellent actor, able to

assume a most deceiving air of innocence and veracity."

"Benton King, I refuse to talk with you about him. Where's your proof that he is not what he claims to be? You have only your unjust suspicions to back you up. I should hate to think you were concerned in the spreading of this preposterous story printed in the Bancroft *News*. Why, if I thought that—"

"I am not concerned in it, to my knowledge; I give you my word of honor on that. When I first suspected that he was Hazelton, of Princeton, I made some inquiries concerning him; but I have carried nothing to Riley. Since he denied in your presence that he was Hazelton, I have not spoken of him to any one save you."

He was very desirous that, though she knew him to be determined to expose Locke as an impostor, she should not get the impression that he, King, would resort to the smallest underhanded device to overthrow a rival. He had told the man plainly that he had sent for a picture of Paul Hazelton. It was to be a fair and open fight to the finish.

"Very well," said Janet, "I believe you. But do not come to me with any more hearsay gossip about Tom Locke. When you have proof I will listen."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE FRAME-UP

AT nine o'clock on Saturday evening, two men sat talking in confidential tones in the Bancroft office of Lawyer Rufus Kilgore. The lawyer himself was not present; he had not even seen Bob Hutchinson follow Mike Riley into that office. But he had loaned Riley the key, with the full knowledge that some sort of a secret conclave was to be held there.

Riley was paid to manage a winning team, and he was at liberty to negotiate what conspiracies he chose for Bancroft's advantage; but, for the ease of his conscience, Kilgore wished to know as little as possible about such plots.

On this occasion, Hutchinson had made the appointment with Riley, specifically stating that no third party was to be present during the interview. In his heart bitter rancor toward Tom Locke gnawed like canker; his hatred for the man who had indiscreetly told him the fearless truth concerning his own treacherous character was like a wound that would not heal. Alone with Riley

in that office, with the door locked, he unhesitatingly announced his determination to "put the knife into Lefty." Mike listened, grinning his satisfaction.

"What's happened?" he asked, leaning back in the creaking swivel chair and elevating his big, flat feet on the open, littered desk. "You and him been havin' some sort of a diff'runce?"

"The cub dared to shoot his face off to me," explained Hutchinson. "I told him his baseball career at college was ended, and that it would be mighty short in this league. I shall notify the proper authorities at Princeton, and furnish proof that he is a professional, and I propose to put him on the blink here so that no team in the Northern League can use him."

Riley suddenly looked doubtful.

"Now, look here, Hutch," he said. "Why not put him on the blink as far as Kingsbridge is concerned, and let us have him, if we can get him? As long as you get your dough for managing, you don't care a rap whether the Kinks win or not. If he can keep up the pace he's set, he'd be a mighty valuable man fer Bancroft."

"No," returned Hutchinson coldly and grimly; "after what he's said to me, I'll not give him the satisfaction of holding a job anywhere in this

league. Don't you see, Riley, if he were to come over to you and be used successfully against Kingsbridge, he might think that he was getting back at me? I've made up my mind to put him down and out, and when it is done I intend to let him know I did it. It will benefit you if he is barred entirely, and that should be sufficient to make you ready to help put him to the mat. You don't really need him, anyhow."

"Mebbe not," agreed Mike. "I'm out after a southpaw right now that can make this college lefty look like a frappéd lemon, and I've got my left-hand hitters practicing against a kid left-hander with speed and curves, so that they can pound that kind of pitchin'. Didn't know but my claims to him might fall through, y'see."

"Then," questioned the treacherous Kingsbridge manager, "you haven't any real claim? You haven't a letter from him speaking of terms, or anything like that?"

"I haven't," confessed Riley. "I writ him twict, but I never got no answer. It made me sore to think that old doughhead, Cope, should beat me to it, and I made up my mind to bluff the thing through as fur as possible. Didn't calc'late the youngster, knowin' how it would bump him at college, would relish the advertisin' he was bound

to get, and thought mebbe, to hush it, he might give in, admit I did have a claim, and come over to us."

"Not in a thousand years," said Hutchinson; "not unless you've really got a claim. He's just bull-headed enough to fight it out. I saw that by the way he met me when I showed him the piece in the *News*. He wouldn't admit that his name was Hazelton."

Suddenly Riley let his feet fall with a thud to the floor, the swivel chair swinging forward with his huge body, and brought his clenched fist down on the desk.

"By thunder!" he exclaimed.

Hutchinson looked at him expectantly.

"By thunder!" repeated Mike. "Perhaps it ain't!"

"Isn't what?"

"Perhaps it isn't Hazelton. I have private information that, being cornered fair and square, he has denied it flat."

For a fleeting moment Hutchinson seemed startled out of his usual cold indifference, but he quickly recovered.

"Preposterous," he said. "The fellow must be Hazelton."

"I dunno. I reckoned so myself, but—"

"Look here, Mike, if he isn't, why should he let

this controversy over him go on? Then, there's Cope, who thinks—''

''Nobody in the Northern League knows Hazelton. Even Cope may be fooled.''

''How? He signed Hazelton to pitch.''

''But even he had never see the man. He made arrangements entirely by letter. What if Hazelton, not caring to come himself, sent a substitute? Jupiter! If that's how the land lays, this Locke would have the laugh on ev'rybody when the truth came out. We'd all feel like a man caught tryin' to spend plugged money.''

Hutchinson pondered. The possibility suggested by Riley was something that had not occurred to him, but, although he could perceive that such a thing might be true, a brief bit of meditation led him to reject it as improbable.

''You're wrong,'' he said. ''I'll stake my life that he is Hazelton.''

''We've got t' be sure,'' growled the Bancroft manager. ''It won't do to go ahead until we are. Say, I wouldn't have him put one like that over on me for a cool thousan'. I'd be guyed aplenty. Think of us howlin' about Hazelton and claimin' that Locke was him, only to have it pan out that we'd been makin' a lot o' jacks of ourselves. I wouldn't hear the last of it in a year.''

"Then I'll find a way to get the proof that he *is* Hazelton," promised Hutch. "But when we've got it, what are we going to do? I thought you had some semblance of a claim which would give us an excuse to get together and sign an agreement not to use him, either one of us."

"And have him go over to Fryeburg or Lakeport?"

"No. We could fix that by faking up a claim that, on account of crookedness on his part, he was suspended. A man suspended can't be taken up by another team in the same league; they've got to wait for his release, and we'd both refuse to release him. Settlement of the matter could be hung up until the season was over."

Riley thumped the desk again, grinning at his worthy associate in conspiracy.

"You've got a head, Hutch," he complimented. "You alwus was clever at framin' up jobs, and I reckon, together, we could put it through. If I knowed f'r sure Locke was Hazelton, and had some of his handwritin'—well, I cal'late I could get a letter faked that would cook his goose. I know a clever guy who'd do the pen-work. You bring me proof that he's Hazelton, together with a workin' sample of his penmanship, and we'll put him down, both shoulders to the carpet. I'll have

old Cope weepin' briny tears for his lost wizard."

"It's a bargain," said Hutchinson, rising. "But it must be agreed that we simply hang him up so that no team in the league can use him. Leave it to me; I'll settle the question regarding his identity, and get the sample of penmanship you want. He's practically a dead one this minute."

"If I land that new southpaw, I won't need him, anyhow," said the Bancroft manager. "But don't lose no time, Hutch."

"I won't. I'm too eager to fix him to dally."

It was late before Hutchinson retired that night, but still he lay awake a long time, and finally a method by which he could possibly get hold of some of Tom Locke's handwriting flashed through his mind.

"Ah!" he breathed. "Now I can sleep. He attended church last Sunday; if he does so tomorrow, I'll see if I can't find a way to look over the contents of that writing desk in his room. It's possible I may find something more than a mere specimen of his chirography."

With this comforting thought, he soon drifted off into slumber as peaceful and unbroken as that of a healthy man who has no reason for a single troubled qualm

CHAPTER XXX

THE LETTER IN THE DESK

SHORTLY after Sunday morning breakfast, Hutch had a private talk in his room with one of the two bell hops of the hotel, following which he complacently strolled down to the veranda, where, lounging in a comfortable chair, he presently saw Tom Locke come forth and depart on his way to church. When the pitcher had vanished, the man rose and returned to his room.

In less than fifteen minutes there came a light, nervous tap on the door, and, at Hutchinson's invitation to enter, the bell boy, looking a trifle pale, glided in.

"Well, did you get the pass-key?" questioned the manager.

"Yes, sir," answered the boy; "I slipped it off the hook when the clerk wasn't looking, but if I'm caught I'll be in a peck of trouble. I wouldn't do this, only—"

"Only you need the tenner I offered. Here it is."

He passed over a ten-dollar bill, which the boy took with a hand that was a trifle unsteady.

"Now, go ahead down the corridor, and open the door when nobody's looking, but don't act so sneaky that you'll be suspected if some guest should see you," ordered Hutchinson. "Leave the door ajar a bit. The chambermaid for this floor is working at the front of the house, isn't she?"

"Yep; she was in Number Eleven when I come up. If I'm caught—"

"Quit that, and get a move on. When I come out, I'll close the door. You can lock it afterward. Stir yourself now."

A few minutes later, stepping almost as lightly as a cat, Hutchinson left his own room, and moved down the corridor until, at the far end, he saw the door of Number Twenty-two, which was Tom Locke's room, standing the least bit ajar. In a moment he had passed inside, closed the door quietly, and shot the safety bolt.

The room had not been made up, but it was the maid's rule to take care of the front of the house first, and Hutch was not particularly fearful of interruption. If she should come, she would find the door bolted, and, unless she had seen him go out, doubtless she would think Locke still there.

Hutchinson wasted no time. Testing the desk, he found it locked, whereupon he produced a huge bunch of keys, muttering:

"If one of these won't do it, I'll have to break it open. I'm going into it now, anyhow."

Selecting the keys most likely to fit such a lock, he found that the fourth one tried served his purpose. The bolt clicked, and he opened the lid. Although he was moving swiftly, apparently he was still as cool and unagitated as Locke might have been himself while opening the desk with the proper key, which the pitcher carried in his pocket.

Immediately on lowering the lid of the desk, Hutchinson's eyes discovered something that gave him a feeling of satisfaction. It was an unfinished letter, written on the paper of the hotel, pushed back and left lying under the pigeonholes.

"This ought to tell me something," muttered the man. "It's a letter the fellow hasn't found time to finish, and, at least, it will furnish the needed specimen of his handwriting."

In the most informal way, without giving the full name and address of the person for whom it was intended, the letter began: "My dear Grandall;" and went on to give an account of the experiences of the writer since his arrival in Kingsbridge.

The chirography was strong and manly, and extremely easy to read, although not at all of the "copper-plate" variety.

Hutchinson, running through the letter swiftly in search of the proof he desired, gave little heed to the quaintly humorous description of the pulp-mill town, "baseball batty"; and he skimmed through the somewhat graphic, self-chaffing account of the first game pitched by the writer, in which, as he laughingly confessed, he began with "a combination attack of stage fright and buck fever." These paragraphs, however, he perused without missing a word:

As I say, we have a good team, and I think it should be a winning one if our manager is on the square and wants it to win. For some reason I do not trust the man.

At our first meeting I was seized by a powerful instinctive feeling of dislike and distrust. He is cold as a fish and bloodless as a stone, with a voice as flat and monotonous as the Desert of Sahara, and his frosty, unfeeling eye is not the eye of an honest man.

He does not belong in Kingsbridge, but has been hired, like the players on the team, and I should say that he is a person who stands ready to sell himself at any time for a price.

If it should happen that, near the close of the season, Kingsbridge stands between Bancroft and championship honors, Bancroft will cop the pennant easily enough by dickering on the "q. t." with Mr. Robert Hutchinson—or I'm away off my trolley.

It was characteristic of the man reading the letter that he did not show his rage by flushing. His

nose, however, became a livid, sickly white, and his thin lips were pressed somewhat more closely together, causing his mouth to resemble a straight, colorless scar. His face was that of a most dangerous man who would strike at an enemy's back in the dark.

There were other paragraphs that Hutchinson read without skipping a line:

Oh, by the way, old fellow, I have met the most charming girl it has ever been my good luck to run across. I'm not going to try to describe her, because I simply lack command of language to do so, and by this confession alone you can see that she has me going some.

Her name is Janet Harting, and she is the daughter of a hard-shell parson whose pet aversion is baseball—a man who, according to report, believes all baseball players must be either children, fools, or ruffians.

Janet, however, has attended boarding school, and she's a thoroughbred fan, though her father raises such a rumpus about it that she doesn't get out to many games.

Benton King, son of the man who has metamorphosed Kingsbridge from a four-corners settlement into a hustling, rip-roaring young city-to-be, is mightily interested in Miss Janet. Judging by appearances, she is not exactly averse to his attentions, which, considering his prospects and the fact that he seems to have anything around here in the eligible-young-man line left at the post, is no source for wonderment.

Sometimes I think I'd like to see if I couldn't give him a run for his money, but—well, you know how I'm situated, and —what's the use!

"Not a bit of use, young man—not a bit," muttered Bob Hutchinson. "When I get through

with you, it isn't likely you'll have a reputation that'll make you particularly attractive to a discriminating young lady."

Hutchinson was much disappointed when he came to the abrupt breaking off of the unfinished letter in the middle of the last page, and failed to find anything in it that would prove that Locke and Hazelton of Princeton were one and the same.

He decided at once to purloin the final page, leaving the others as he had found them. He would relock the desk when he departed from the room, and Locke, missing the final sheet, might fancy that somehow it had slipped from the others and been tossed into the near-by wastebasket, to be carried off by the maid.

In one of the pigeonholes were two letters. Both were addressed on the envelopes to "Mr. Tom Locke." The first one opened contained only the post-card picture of a strikingly pretty young girl, who was laughingly exhibiting some fetching dimples. Across the bottom of the picture was written: "To 'Big Bub,' with love, from 'Tid.' "

A look of understanding drifted across Hutchinson's face as he gazed at the picture, and, returning it to the envelope, he observed:

"So that's how you're 'situated,' Mr. Tom Locke; that's the reason why you are refraining

from trying to give King a run for his money with the parson's daughter. If you were going to hang around this town long enough, I'll guarantee you would forget about 'Tid' and make an effort to get into the running, just the same. It may be lucky for King that you'll be going away very soon."

He returned the picture to the pigeonhole, and investigated the contents of the other letter, consisting of a single sheet of paper, on which a brief note had apparently been scrawled with much haste.

The handwriting was masculine, and there was no date line to tell from whence it had come, but the first two words were enough to give Hutchinson considerable satisfaction. They were: "Dear Hazelton." With some trouble, the manager deciphered what followed:

> Don't worry any more about the Kernell case. Wyloft & Pettengall have informed me that it will surely be settled out of court. I'll have further information from them in a few days, but I'm sure there'll be no necessity for you to come back here until you get through with your baseball job.
>
> Hope you make good up there in the bush, though you were afraid when you left that your arm had lost some of its cunning. Let me know what success you are having.
>
> Ever yours,
> GRANDALL.

"Ah!" breathed Bob Hutchinson. "As proof, I think this should satisfy Riley. The envelope

is addressed to 'Tom Locke,' but the writer calls him Hazelton in the message. That settles it. I don't need the envelope, but I think I'll keep its contents for Riley's eyes. Now, we can go ahead without hesitation, and sink the harpoon to the hilt."

CHAPTER XXXI

TOM, TOMMY AND JANET

IN a grove upon the bank of the log-choked river, Tom Locke lay stretched on a carpet of brown pine needles, reading from a little book. The sunshine, sifting through the trees, cast upon the ground golden fleckings, which wavered and danced as a soft breeze stirred the upper branches.

By turning his head and lifting his eyes, Tom could catch a glimpse, through an opening, of the distant village and the mills below the dam, silent and dozing in the peaceful warmth of the Sabbath afternoon. So absorbed was he, however, that he rarely paused to give attention to that view.

He scarcely heard the sounds of children's voices in the grove; sounds which gradually drew nearer. When at last he did take note, it was because their close approach had aroused him, but, trusting he would be left undisturbed in his glade, he resumed his reading.

Suddenly he was startled into full attention by a voice which called:

"Tommy, Tommy, where are you?"

The voice, clear, mellow, flute-like, gave him a singular thrill that brought him up to a sitting position. The book dropped from his hand, forgotten. No child's voice was that; he had heard it before, coming from lips whose fair curve and fullness he could not forget, and, though he chided himself for his folly, its echoes had haunted him even in his dreams.

He waited, breathless, expectant, desiring to hear the call repeated, and that desire was quickly gratified.

"Tommy, Tommy, why don't you answer me?"

He was tempted to answer, but that was unnecessary; for the branches parted, and she appeared in full view, pausing instantly on beholding him, her blue eyes wide with surprise, her flushed cheeks quickly taking on a deeper tint.

She was dressed in white, an occasional ribbon adding a livening bit of color, and the sight of her figure, poised against that dark-green background, slender, startled, entrancing, set his heart thumping. Nor was his voice quite natural as he hastily rose, bowed, and asked:

"Did you call me, Miss Harting?"

"Oh—oh, I beg your pardon!" she returned,

laughing nervously. "You gave me a start. I didn't know you were here."

"I'm glad I am," he asserted. "Just now I'd rather be here than anywhere else in the world. It is I who should beg your pardon for startling you."

There could be no question, his bearing and words marked the gentleman; if doubts had troubled her, they fled at once. In the garb of the baseball field he had looked well; in a suit of gray tweed, negligee shirt, and russet shoes, he looked far better. His soft hat lay on the ground near the book. She, too, felt her heart beating fast.

"When I sought this quiet spot," he went on, as she still remained silent, "I scarcely anticipated the pleasure of beholding a wood nymph. And hark!—the pipes of Pan!"

The sound of music came from some spot near at hand.

"It's Tommy's harmonica," she laughed. "Tommy," she called again, "where are you, you rascal?"

She was answered by an elfish burst of laughter, followed by a rustling in the bushes and the appearance of a head of tousled, reddish hair, a freckled, snub-nosed face, and a pair of mis-

chievous, dancing eyes that widened at the sight of Locke.

"Gee!" said the boy, coming into full view. "I didn't know he was here. Where's the rest of the bunch, Miss Janet?" One soiled hand gripped the harmonica.

"You see what you did by running away, Tommy," said the girl, in mock severity. "You made me disturb Mr. Locke."

"For which offense, Tommy," smiled the young man, "I'll stand treat at the candy store the first chance I get. While not in the least desiring to encourage insubordination, I must say I'm glad you ran away."

Janet flashed him a look, and her eyes dropped before his gaze. She could feel the flush in her cheeks.

"I came out for a walk with some of the little fellows of my Sunday-school class," she hastened to explain. "Tommy Murphy is always up to his pranks. One day he got lost in the woods, and they didn't find him until eleven o'clock that night."

"Never got lost," denied the boy instantly. 'My old man give me a larrupin', 'n' I jest run off to go West an' fight Injuns, but it come dark 'n' I had ter camp in the woods, 'n' they ketched

me 'n' took me back home. My maw, she didn't let my paw larrup me no more fer that, fer she knowed I was desprut, an' I'd said that I'd run erway ag'in if I was thrashed any more. When a desprut man says that, folks better be careful what they do to him."

With some difficulty, Locke refrained from a delighted outburst of laughter. "I quite agree with you, Tommy," he said. "There have been occasions when I was desperate myself."

"I know, I know," eagerly cried the little fellow. "I seen that fust game you pitched ag'inst Bancrof'. Gee! You must 'a' been desprut with the bunch howlin' at ye 'n' you plumb off your pins; but you jes' got together an' made ther Bullies' look like er lotter shines. I see all ther games. It don't cost me nuthin'; I know er loose board, 'n' I crawl t'rough the fence. Say," he added, in sudden alarm over the indiscretion of this confession, "you won't gimme erway, will ye?"

"Never," promised the pitcher solemnly. "I register an oath to be silent as the grave."

"Come, Tommy," said Janet, "we must go back to the others."

"Aw, w'ats the use o' hurryin'?" objected the boy. "They're comin' this way now." He

lifted his voice in a shrill shout: "Hey, fellers, come on! This way. Here we be."

There were answering calls, and the sound of running feet and crashing bushes. Seeing a look of uncertainty upon the girl's face, Locke hastened to reassure her:

"Let them come, Miss Harting. This is as good a place as any for them to amuse themselves."

"But you—we have disturbed your reading."

"There are things more interesting than books, and I was really a bit lonely. See, there is a clean log on which you may sit, and, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you. You'll certainly be well chaperoned. Of course, if you object to my company and—"

Making the grove ring with their whoops, six youngsters came bursting into the glade. Tommy quickly satisfied their surprised curiosity regarding the young man they found talking to their teacher.

"That's Lefty," he said. "We jes' run ercrost him here by accidunt. He's ther greatest pitcher that ever bent er slant over the slab round these parts. Me brudder Bill says so."

"Aw, g'wan!" retorted a barefooted boy, who was a bit larger and somewhat older. "My brud-

der Sam says Lefty ain't so much, only he's a southpaw, an' Bancrof' 's gotter lot of left-hand knockers; an' that's how he bothers 'em."

"Looker here, Jimmy," said Tommy ominously, thrusting the harmonica into his pocket, "your brudder Sam was talkin' through his hat. Anyhow, he dunno beans 'bout baseball."

"He knows as much as your brudder Bill."

"You're another!"

The two boys flew at each other, Tommy getting in the first crack and following it up hotly; but Locke's strong hands quickly separated them and held them apart.

"He said you warn't no good as a pitcher," panted Tommy. "Lemme go, an' I'll make him eat his words."

"Aw, let 'im come," sneered Jimmy, "an' I'll knock ther block off him."

It was Janet who succeeded in shaming them into a temporary truce; but, although they promised to fight no more on Sunday, both muttered dire threats of what they would do to each other the first time they met on a week day.

"Aren't you ashamed to fight?" asked the girl, reprovingly.

"Nix," replied Tommy. "A feller ain't no good that can't fight. Me brudder Bill says that

Lefty can fight jest as well as he can pitch, an' that's goin' some."

"I am afraid," said Janet to Locke, "that you have set a bad example."

"But not willingly," he quickly declared. "I hope you do not think I would engage in a public fist fight from inclination. I assure you that the knowledge that you witnessed that wretched affair has caused me no little mortification."

"You were justified," she said. "I saw it all, and there was no manly way by which you could have avoided it."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE INITIALS

HE thanked her for the words, and secured his hat and book as they walked slowly toward the log. Tommy was again blowing away at his harmonica, Jimmy was sulking, and the others fell to amusing themselves with a game of hide and seek. Janet sat on the log, and Locke seated himself near her.

"What were you reading?" she asked curiously.

He gave her the book, and she glanced at it. It was a well-thumbed volume of "The Merchant of Venice."

"My favorite when I read Shakespeare," he said. "I don't know why, but I have read it over and over. At the moment when I heard you calling, I was reading Bassanio's raptures on finding Portia's portrait in the leaden casket."

Leaning forward a bit and looking steadily at her, he quoted:

> "'Here are sever'd lips,
> Parted with sugar breath: so sweet a bar
> Should sunder such sweet friends. Here in her hairs

The painter plays the spider and hath woven
A golden mesh to entrap the hearts of men.'"

His voice was low and soft, yet full and deep. Again her eyes drooped before his. One shapely white hand toyed with a loose bit of bark.

"You quote well," she said, compelling herself to speak calmly, almost carelessly. "You should be a teacher of elocution."

"The task would be agreeable indeed," he returned, "if I could choose my pupil."

"You speak in the singular."

"Which," he declared instantly, "is not at all singular, the situation considered. Had I my choice, I'd not seek a pupil beyond this little glade."

"Oh, if you were to pick one of my Sunday-school class, I'm afraid you would not find the task particularly agreeable. Teaching elocution to Tommy or Jimmy or any of the others would be thankless work."

He smiled. "I'd not care to seek so far, yet I know it is presumptuous for me to fancy that I could teach *you*."

She flashed him a smile that went to his head like wine and made him long to imprison the dainty hand that was still toying with the bit of loose bark. There was a brief silence, broken

only by the echoing cries of the romping children.

"Tommy, Tommy!" she cried suddenly, "play 'Marching Through Georgia.' Just listen, Mr. Locke; Tommy plays very well for a little fellow. Don't you think so?"

"To tell the truth, I don't, but, if you say so, I'll swear he plays divinely."

"You have a habit of speaking the truth always?"

"It is my intention to follow the practice when possible."

"Do you think a lie is ever excusable?"

"One of the leading divines in the country has said that a harmless white lie is permissible when it shields a friend from truth that would cause pain."

"Do you know there are those who think you were not truthful when you denied that you are Paul Hazelton, of Princeton?"

"I believe that there is one, at least, who thinks so. The doubt in Benton King's eyes was too plain to escape me."

"But you are *not* Paul Hazelton?"

"I am not. I hope you believe me, Miss Harting."

"I do," she answered. "But I can't understand why they persist in trying to make out that

you are he. The Bancroft *News* printed a piece that would lead people to believe it."

"Which is evidence that there are those besides Benton King who wish to believe it, and, of them all, doubtless Manager Riley, of Bancroft, is the most eager; for he pretends to have some sort of a claim, according to the rules of the Northern League, upon the services of Paul Hazelton. If I am the Hazelton in question, he means to take me away from Kingsbridge, even though he may fail in compelling me to pitch for the Bullies. That's his game, Miss Harting. When he has pushed it to the limit, he'll find that he's barking up the wrong tree, and the laugh will be on him and the others who have fooled themselves in the same way."

Although he smiled a little, his words were spoken with such sincere frankness and honesty that she was shamed by the thought that even the slightest shadow of doubt had clouded her confidence in him. A man with such steady eyes, set well apart; such a mouth, unmarred by the soiling touch of guile; such a voice, deep, strong, yet suppressed, like the softened notes of an organ—that man could not lie.

"I am beginning to understand," she said hastily. "It is just like those Bancrofters; they are

determined that Kingsbridge shall not get ahead of them at anything. They are terribly wrought up because we have beaten them at baseball, and they'll do anything to weaken our team. I—I'm glad they can't get you away from us. Do you think we have a good chance to win the pennant this year?"

"If the games are played on their merits, with no underhanded work, I see no reason why Kingsbridge should not stand as much chance to win as Bancroft. You did not come out to the Lakeport game."

"How do you know?"

"I looked for you."

"But—in all that crowd—"

"I am sure you were not there; if you had been, I should have seen you."

"No," she answered, glowing at the knowledge that he had taken so much trouble to sek for her in the crowd. "I have not seen a game since the first one you pitched. Father raises such objections that I have thought best to stay away, even though he has not positively forbidden me to attend. If I can get an escort, I shall do my best to persuade him to let me see the next game when Bancroft plays here. Every one in Kingsbridge seems to think it will be a great battle."

"Bancroft comes Wednesday, this week."

"And you will pitch?"

"I don't know; I presume so."

"Oh, I'll see it unless father positively refuses to let me go. I *must* see that game! I hope you pitch as well as you did before."

"I hope so myself," he laughed, "although for a time in the first inning I was almost led to believe I couldn't pitch at all."

"I'll never forget it," she breathed. "It was dreadful. The crowd was howling at you so, and you seemed utterly unable to get the ball over. I confess that I, too, thought you were useless as a pitcher. But when you redeemed yourself, and the crowd became satisfied that you could hold Bancroft, how quickly the howling turned to cheers! I can hear them now, crying: 'Oh, you Lefty!' It was splendid!"

Janet's cheeks were bright, and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm reawakened by those exciting moment. Watching the movements of her lips, revealing flitting glimpses of perfect teeth; listening to her voice, as sweet as that of Bassanio's beloved maid; entranced by the violet light of her eyes, all aglow with earnestness; he was stirred as never before in all his life.

Then and there came the knowledge that she

was the one girl for him. He longed to tell her, but words fit to do him such service seemed impossible to find; he doubted if they were contained in any language.

The first words were trembling on his lips when suddenly one of the romping children uttered a cry of pain, followed immediately by other cries, bringing Janet to her feet in alarm.

"What is it?" she called.

"It's Jimmy," answered Tommy Murphy, appearing from behind some bushes. "He's cut his foot on somep'n. It's bleedin' fierce."

Locke was at Janet's side when she reached Jimmy, who was sitting on the ground, surrounded by the other little boys, and holding one of his bare feet. It had been gashed by a broken bottle hidden by fallen leaves and vines.

Without hesitation Janet dropped to her knees to do what she could, but Tom was equally swift and unfaltering in action. Whipping forth a spotless handkerchief, he knelt to bind up the injury.

"It will be best to take him to a doctor right away," he said, "for there may be pieces of glass in the cut. Let me attend to this, Miss Harting. I can do it alone; I won't need any help," he declared, as he observed that all the color had departed from her cheeks, leaving them very pale.

"Let me help," she urged steadily.

"Yuh—yuh don't think I—I'll bl-e-bleed ter death, do ye?" sobbed Jimmy.

"Hardly as bad as that, old chap," smiled Locke, as he wound the handkerchief round the foot and drew it tight. "There's no danger at all. We'll have you fixed up all right. It doesn't hurt much, does it?"

"Aw, I don't care a rap fer ther hurtin', but it bled so like thunder that it got my goat," was the reply.

Janet, watching, saw Tom bring two corners of the folded handkerchief together to tie them. On one of those corners her eyes beheld some initials, plainly and distinctly worked; so plain and distinct were they that there could be no possible mistake as to what they were. She stared at them, wondering, for the letters were "P. H."

"There you are, old man," said Locke cheerfully, when he had knotted the ends of the handkerchief securely. "Never mind if the blood does come through; the doctor will stop that pretty quick. Now, come on, and I'll take you to him pickapack."

He lifted the little fellow lightly, and swung him to his back. Janet rose, and followed, the children, chattering, trailing after.

"P. H.," she whispered to herself. "Those letters surely do not stand for Tom Locke."

But there was another name which they served —a name which Benton King had declared rightfully belonged to the man who called himself Tom Locke.

CHAPTER XXXIII

KING AROUSED

BENTON KING, politely invited—nay, urged—to call on Bob Hutchinson at the Central Hotel, dropped round that same Sunday afternoon, out of passing curiosity, and listened with swiftly growing interest to what Hutchinson had to tell.

"I knew it!" exclaimed King triumphantly, when the vengeful manager had finished. "I knew it all the time, but I didn't have the proof. For the last few days I've been expecting a letter that ought to contain all the proof anybody wants."

"What more," inquired Hutchinson, "do you want than what I have given you? I have shown you the letter written to Hazelton, which was mailed to him in an envelope addressed to Tom Locke. That certainly nails it on him for fair."

"Yes," said Bent, with a nod, "but I'll have something more convincing than that for a skeptical person, if I'm not badly mistaken. He was a fool to deny his identity in the first place."

"Right; especially to his manager. We protect college guys who confide in us, and let them play under fake names if they wish, but this man has been crooked with me, and there's no reason why I should cover him up. You should have seen the other letter I spoke of, the one he was writing. I read it, thinking he might give himself away. He knocked me in it, and he soaked you."

"Me?"

"Yes. He said you were a fellow with more money than brains, thanks to a rich father. He also referred to a certain young lady in town by the name of Janet Harting; said you were chasing round after her, but he proposed to get busy and cut you out, as she was the prettiest girl he had seen around here, and would serve to amuse him while he had to stay here."

King's face was dark; his hands clenched, and his eyes flashed. A singular ring of yellowish pallor formed round his mouth, his lips drew back from his teeth, and he cried:

"He denied, in her presence, that he was Hazelton, and I know what she thinks of a liar. He won't amuse himself much with her when I am through with him."

Thoroughly satisfied, Hutchinson walked slowly toward his window, which looked out on the main

street of the town. He had begun the work of undermining the man who had dared express to his face an unreserved opinion of him as a manager, and when he, Hutchinson, was finished, the so-called Tom Locke would be down and done for.

"I have your promise, Mr. King," said Hutch, "to say nothing concerning the source of your information. I was determined to know the truth about that man, but you can understand that the general public might not approve of my method of obtaining it."

Suddenly he brushed back one of the coarse lace curtains, and leaned forward to look out of the window.

"I declare," he said, without the slightest change in his voice, "if here isn't our man now, carrying a kid on his back; and, on my word, the young lady in question is with him."

King crossed the room, almost at a bound, snatching aside the curtains. True, Locke was passing on the opposite side of the street, bearing on his back a little boy, whose left foot was bound about with a bloodstained handkerchief. Janet walked beside him; the other children straggled along behind.

There was a roaring in Benton King's ears, and a reddish mist seemed to flow across his vision like

a filmy waterfall in the evening sunlight. Far and wide in lumber land, old Cyrus King was known as a man with a violent and ungovernable temper, deadly dangerous when aroused, and, in this respect, at least, Benton was his father's son.

"I'll do up that sneaking, boasting fellow!" he snarled wolfishly, sick to the core with the rage that possessed him.

"Evidently," said Hutchinson, heaping fuel to the leaping flames, "he has begun to amuse himself with Miss Harting."

"I'll get him!" cried Bent again, burning and freezing alternately with fury that made him tremble. "And I'll make quick work of it!"

He wheeled from the window, but Hutch turned with equal swiftness and shot out a pair of hands that fastened upon him.

"Hold on," said the manager. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to fix him—to fix him! Hands off! He can't make a jest of that girl! Amuse himself with her, will he? His pleasure will be brief! Let me go!"

Exerting all his strength, Hutchinson swung the infuriated young man to one side, giving him a thrust that made him stagger. Springing to the door, the manager turned the key in the lock,

removed it, and put it into his pocket. Again he faced King, one open hand upheld, palm outward.

"Open that door!" shouted Bent, his eyes glaring, a bit of white foam on his lips. "What are you trying to do?"

"I am trying to prevent you from making a fool of yourself," answered the other calmly. "Listen to me a minute. Have you any regard whatever for Miss Harting?"

"Have I? I'm going to protect her from that wolf. Let me out!"

"Do you want to involve her in a scandal? In your present state of blind madness, you would rush after them and attack the man upon the street. A common scrap over a girl on Sunday—you know what that means. The burg would buzz with it; the young lady would feel herself humiliated and disgraced. Do you think you would gain favor in her eyes by such folly? Besides, you are no match for that fellow; you ought to know it, for you saw him whip Jock Hoover, and Hoover's no slouch of a fighter. You would not make a very heroic figure in that sort of an affair."

"I can fight, if necessary," panted Benton. "I discharged two men last week because they left work to attend a ball game against my orders. One of them was a dago, and he came back, drunk,

to cut me up. I took his knife away from him and threw him out. I can fight, and I'm not afraid of a coward who hides behind a fake name."

"Even if you whipped him, you'd stand a good chance of putting yourself in Dutch with the girl, who surely would be mortified by the notoriety the affair would bring. Have some sense; wait a bit, King, and cool off. With a clear head, you'll see that there are other and far better ways of fixing the man."

CHAPTER XXXIV

GIVEN THE LIE

THE calmness of the speaker had its effect on the trembling young fellow, who stood there, hands clenched, breast heaving, slowly beginning to realize that it was his duty to do nothing that would humiliate the girl and involve her in the speculations of scandal-loving tongues.

"Let me out now," he said, after a few moments, "and I'll meet Hazelton as he is coming back. Miss Harting's name shall not be mentioned."

"That's a bit more reasonable, but further thought ought to convince you that there's nothing but folly in getting into a fist fight with him, in which you are sure to come off second best. Why give him the satisfaction of whipping you? You know it's more than an even gamble that he would."

Hutchinson looked sharply at King.

"Now, listen to me. You say the girl hates a liar, and he has sworn in her presence that he is

not Hazelton," said the manager. "If you prove to her that he lied, isn't it likely she'll drop him like a hot flatiron? In that way, you'll protect her, all right, and you'll put the blade into him, after which any comparison on her part between you and the man who tried to deceive her will be decidedly to your advantage."

"Yes," admitted King, "perhaps so, but to think of him trying to carry this thing through in such a brazen—"

"He has simply besmirched himself, and his sojourn in Kingsbridge will be brief. Mike Riley has in his possession a letter from Paul Hazelton, which, as it is an effort to jack Riley up in the matter of salary—Riley having made Hazelton an offer to pitch for Bancroft—will establish Bancroft's prior claim to the man. As near as I can learn, old Cope got Hazelton by paying him a preposterously big sum."

"If he goes to Bancroft, he'll still be pitching in the league and appearing regularly in Kingsbridge."

Hutchinson permitted a frosty smile to fade across his face. "He'll never pitch for Bancroft or any other team in the Northern League. Riley is sore. I am telling you in confidence that we have talked the matter over and agreed that Haz-

elton shall be suspended indefinitely for tricky work. That will put an end to his meteoric career in these parts. All that was needed was proof positive that the man was Hazelton, and I have it."

"When will he be suspended?"

"Some time this present week, when a meeting of the league association will be called in Bancroft especially to consider his case. Doubtless you know that Riley has already served notice on us that all games won by Kingsbridge with Locke on the mound will be protested. As a pitcher around here, the fellow is as good as a dead one this minute. He has killed himself in college baseball, also."

"Which serves him right. But what will Kingsbridge do for a first-class pitcher?"

"I have one man coming, and another on the string. The first one I expect to arrive by Tuesday or Wednesday, at the latest. If I am left to manage this team, with no interference from Cope, I'll manage it right. He has messed things up beautifully and given us a bad start."

They talked until the scheming manager saw that King, though brooding, had calmed down; then, satisfied with what he had accomplished he unlocked the door.

Hutchinson descended the stairs with King. At the foot of the flight they encountered Tom Locke, just coming from the hotel office in company with Larry Stark. The pitcher had been telling Stark something, and both men were laughing. Believing he knew what Locke had been saying, and that it concerned Janet Harting, the lumber magnate's son was again obsessed with white-hot anger.

"You'll laugh out of the other side of your mouth in a day or two, Hazelton!" he rasped.

"I beg your pardon," Tom returned, flushing. "My amusement does not concern you, King; and will you be good enough to call me Locke?"

"No, I will not; I'll call you by your right name, which is Paul Hazelton. Deny it here, if you have the nerve."

"Very well, I do deny it."

"Then you're a liar!"

He did not wait for the retaliation the insult seemed certain to bring, but leaped, with the final bitter word, at the accused man's throat. Stepping sideways like a flash, Locke caught him as he sprang, whirled him round, slammed him up against the near-by partition, and held him there. The quickness and strength of the pitcher was amazing.

Instantly Stark sprang to part them, exclaiming:

"Don't hit him, Tom—don't hit him!"

"I haven't any intention of hitting him—this time," answered Locke. "But that was a nasty word he used, and he should be more careful."

Hutchinson took a hand. Two or three other men came quickly from the office and joined in holding the struggling, panting lumber king's son in check, Locke having released him and permitted himself to be pushed back.

"I say he's a liar!" shouted Benton. "He knows he lies! I'll prove it for everybody. Take your hands off me, and I'll fight him here or anywhere else. I dare him to meet me like a man! He hasn't the courage! He's a coward!"

"You're plumb anxious to get your face broke, ain't ye?" snapped Larry Stark. "You wouldn't last a minute with him. What's eating you, anyhow?"

The hotel proprietor indignantly announced that he did not propose to have a fight in his house.

"I'm surprised, Mr. King, that you should start trouble here," he said. "I ask you, as a gentleman, to quit it."

"All right, Mr. Sawyer," said Bent. "As you

have put it up to me that way, it goes. Take your hands off me, everybody. I won't touch him again—here."

"I didn't notice that you touched him at all," grinned Stark.

"But," declared King, smoothing his rumpled coat and straightening his necktie, "I'm not done with him, as he is due to find out. I'll get him yet, and get him good."

After giving Locke a parting look of venomous hatred, the young man turned toward the open door and passed out.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE PHOTOGRAPH

BENTON KING sat in his office at the mill, opening the morning mail, which had just been brought him by a boy. His face wore a heavy frown, and he ripped open the envelopes viciously with the steel paper cutter.

The sounds of the mill—the creaking of the windlass drawing the big sticks up the run, the scream of the saws tearing through logs, the pistol-claps of fresh-cut boards tossed flatly upon other boards by the laborers—annoyed him, and he rose and kicked shut the connecting door, which had been left slightly ajar.

Resuming his seat at the desk, his eye fell on a square, flat package at the bottom of the letters remaining unopened, and he caught it up eagerly.

"Ha!" he breathed, after looking at the address. "Fletcher's handwriting! He got it! This is what I sent for."

Even as he was tearing off the wrapper, however, hesitation and fear came upon him. What if it should not be what he wanted? What if the

photograph he knew the wrapping contained were not that of the man he had accused? The possibility gave him a gripping throb that was keen as the thrust of steel.

"It must be," he muttered huskily. "I can't be wrong. He has put up a big bluff, but he's the man."

His hands were not wholly steady as he finished removing the wrapper of brown manila. The picture was faced with cardboard, and this he flung aside, revealing the printed likeness that had been caught by the camera. Snatching it up, he turned eagerly to permit the light to fall full upon it. His face flamed with triumph; his mouth opened, but no sound issued forth; his clenched fist rose and fell on the desk as if the blow settled the doom of a mortal foe. After a time he laughed; it was not a pleasant laugh.

Presently, when he had gazed until satisfied that even the most obtuse or most obstinate could not behold it and express a doubt as to the almost perfect likeness of the picture to the man who called himself Tom Locke, a likeness far stronger than a mere verisimilitude, he turned again swiftly to the letters that had not yet been opened. Running them over, he selected one on which the writing corresponded to that upon the wrapper that

had been removed from the photograph. No time was wasted in opening it.

New York, June 28, 19—.

Dear Bent: Found an opportunity yesterday to run out to Princeton and get the photograph of Paul Hazelton, which you desire so urgently, and I am sending it under separate cover, letter rates, so it will travel along without delay. Why didn't you tell me more fully what you want of the thing? Night letters by wire are cheap, and even a brief explanation would not have left me puzzling my brains in weather that will hatch eggs without the assistance of either setting hen or incubator. You're lucky to be up there in the open pastures on the border of the big woods, where you can breathe without fancying you are stoking an Atlantic liner.

Crisply,

Fletch.

"Good old Fletch!" chuckled Bent. "I'll write him about it later. He has done me a great service, and Janet, also. This settles the matter beyond any question or dispute."

He looked at his watch; it was nine-thirty. Late enough for him to see Janet, he decided, and, thrusting the letter and the photograph into his pocket, he rose from the desk, leaving the remainder of the mail unopened.

The screams of the mill saws followed him into the streets of the town, and at times it seemed as if their cries of conquering triumph took on something resembling entreaty or warning, but his hurrying feet did not falter, and soon he was ring-

ing at the parsonage door. The white-capped maid answered and said she would find out if Miss Harting could see him. He entered and waited.

He did not have to wait long before Janet appeared, his heartstrings giving a tug as he beheld her in a simple morning gown. In her blue eyes there was a look of wonder, not wholly free from apprehension.

"I—I could hardly believe you were here—so early," she said, scanning his face as if seeking to find there some explanation of this unusual call. "Has—has anything happened?"

"I beg your pardon for coming at this hour," he returned, "but I simply couldn't wait. I hope you understand me and believe me, Janet, when I say that I am your sincere friend, something I hope to prove to your entire satisfaction. Taking the privilege of a friend whose motives cannot be questioned, I must tell you how much I regret having seen you yesterday with the man who calls himself Locke."

Her face did not harden, for there was nothing of hardness in her nature, but it changed, warning him that he was treading on most dangerous ground. She lifted her hand quickly, retreating a step.

"If that is what brings you here, I am sorry you

came. I met Mr. Locke quite by accident while out walking with the children. Jimmy Bryant cut his foot frightfully on a broken bottle, and Mr. Locke bound it up and brought him in to the doctor. I hardly know why I should make this explanation."

"You could not be seen with the man without arousing more or less comment, and you should know what the gossips of this town will say."

"Mr. Locke has satisfied me that he is a thorough gentleman, and unwarranted gossip of narrow-minded persons who are eager for something to talk about cannot frighten me." The color was in her cheeks now.

"A gentleman!" cried Bent, losing his head for a moment. "That two-faced sneak a gentleman! That man who has boasted already that, as you happen to be the prettiest girl in town, he proposes to amuse himself with you! He thinks himself a crusher, the sort that girls get stuck on. He has the post-card photograph of one now, who signs herself 'Tid,' doubtless a silly creature he has flattered and fooled with his lying tongue. And now he proposes to get you on the string and—"

"Stop, Benton King!" Her cheeks had lost the flush, and there was something in her voice

he had never heard before. "Whatever your motive, you are making a blunder. How do you know these things you are saying?"

CHAPTER XXXVI

CRUMBLED CASTLES

FEARING what she might think of him for dealing with a man like Hutchinson, he dared not tell her just how the knowledge had come to him; but he swore it was true, that he knew it was true, and begged her to believe him.

"And, though he has denied it, he is Paul Hazelton. They have the absolute proof, and Mike Riley holds a letter of his that will bar him from baseball in the Northern League. There'll be a meeting called this very week, and he'll be suspended."

"I do not believe it. I told you not to speak to me again about him until you could show proof that—"

"I can! I have it here!"

Exultantly he produced the letter and photograph; the latter he held before her eyes, and she looked at it, speechless.

"The picture of Paul Hazelton, of Princeton," he said. "Does it resemble Mr. Tom Locke?"

"Where—where did you get it?" she asked in

a husky whisper, taking it from his hand with nerveless fingers that nearly let it fall.

"I told you I had sent to a friend, asking him to get Hazelton's picture for me. He went to Princeton for it; here's the name of the Princeton photographer on it."

She had hoped that there might be some doubt; that, even though the photograph resembled Locke, there might be some question as to whether it was not the counterfeit presentment of a person who looked like him. But, with it before her eyes, that hope sank and died; it was the man.

Watching her face, King felt certain he had won at last. He took the picture, and placed the open letter in her hands. She tried to read it, but the lines ran into a blurred mass, and finally, with a choking sensation in her throat, she handed it back, endeavoring to keep him from seeing how hard she was hit.

He sought to crush back and control his exultation; did his best to prevent any touch of it from creeping into his voice.

"While I am sorry, Janet, that you were deceived, even for a minute, by the fellow, I am also glad that no real harm has been done. He has been exposed in time. I knew from the first that he lied brazenly when he denied that he was Hazel-

ton, but he certainly can assume a plausible manner which might fool almost anybody. Henry Cope knew, all along, that he was not what he represented himself to be, but, on account of Riley's claim, and to protect Hazelton, he would not tell the truth. It is useless for him to hold back any longer. I hope you do not blame me, Janet; I'm sure you won't when you have time to think it all over calmly. I care for you more—much more—than I have ever let you know, and for that reason I—"

"Please don't say anything more to me now," she entreated, her voice low but steady. "You were right."

Half turning away, she put out her hand; he seized it quickly, and found it cold.

"I'll not say anything more now," he breathed, close to her shoulder, holding the hand fast in his grasp; "but some time, Janet—some time when you are ready to listen—I'll have something more to say."

On the street he swung off with a free, vigorous stride, his heart beating high. He had won; he was sure of it. The knowledge of her interest in the man, which he had feared might develop into something deeper, had led him to realize the full extent of his own regard for her. She was a poor

clergyman's daughter, and he was the son of Cyrus King, but the little god had winged his arrow straight, and the wound was deliciously deep.

Twenty minutes after King left, Janet, having donned hat and wrap, came out and walked swiftly down the street. Her face was chill and sad; she was deserted by hope; yet she would see Henry Cope.

Behind his counter, the grocer peered at her over his glasses.

"Mornin', Janet," he said cheerfully. " 'N-other ruther nice day."

"Mr. Cope, I'd like to speak with you a moment privately."

Surprised, he took note of her pallor and the girl's troubled look. Her voice had an unusual sound. Pushing up his spectacles, he came from behind the counter.

"Step inter my office," he invited.

In the office he urged her to sit down, saying she looked tired; but she preferred to stand.

"I'll bother you only a minute," she said.

"No bother at all—no bother. What can I do? Anything the matter?"

"I have come to ask you, confidentially, about—about the man who is called Tom Locke." She half turned her head away.

"Eh? Oh, him? What you want t' know?"

"Mr. Cope, I want you to tell me the truth. You need not fear that I will repeat anything you say. You have always been my friend, and now, as such, I ask you to answer my question. I hope you'll not refuse or put me off."

"You bet I've alwus been your friend, little girl," he returned earnestly. "What's the question?"

"You engaged Mr. Locke for the baseball team, and you know who he is. They are saying he is a Princeton College man by the name of Hazelton. Tell me, Mr. Cope, if that is true."

"Now, what makes the difference who he is?" spluttered the grocer, frowning. "I'm bein' pestered to death about him."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to pester you. I gave you my word I would not repeat anything you told me, but if you will not answer my question—"

"Hold on, Janet; I ain't said I wouldn't answer it. I know you won't tell if you say ye won't, and, anyhow, it's beginnin' to look like he'd have to sail under his own colors before long. Yes, Miss Janet, he's Paul Hazelton. I agreed t' keep mum 'bout it so's he wouldn't git inter a mess 'bout pitchin' for his college; but what's the use, with

Mike Riley raisin' high jinks an' claimin' he's got a holt on the boy, and even settin' the newspapers to buzzin'? I'm ruther sorry for Hazelton, but I s'pose he knew he was takin' a chance when he come here."

"That's all," said the girl; "thank you. Now, I hope you'll not tell anybody that I came to you to inquire about him?"

"Not a peep, little girl. He's a mighty nice feller, I'll say that fer him. Don't seem to have no bad habits, an' goes t' church, an'—"

But she did not wait to hear him enumerate the virtues of the man who had looked straight into her eyes and lied without a tremor; the man who was proud of his conquests with the fair sex, and had boasted that he would amuse himself with her while in Kingsbridge. What a despicable creature the fellow was! She left the store.

On the way back home, Janet passed several persons without noticing them at all, but she kept her face set with the fixed purpose of preventing any one who saw her from imagining that she was fighting back a flood of tears. Glad that her father was out for a morning walk, she avoided the maid, hurried to her room, locked the door, and permitted the flood to burst the restraining gates.

After a time, having "cried it out," she sat in an easy-chair near the window, watching a mother robin on her nest in the tree outside.

She was not thinking of the robin, however; she was thinking of yesterday and the meeting in the woods—a day she had thought the happiest of her life. She was thinking of the manner in which Locke had looked at her with those clear, honest brown eyes, and how she had thrilled beneath that look. She was thinking of his voice as, sitting on the log and leaning toward her, he had quoted the words of Bassanio, causing the heart, now cold and heavy in her breast, to leap and throb until it seemed that he must hear its joyous beating.

No man had ever stirred her like that, and something told her that no other man could so stir her again. And all the time he had been playing with her—amusing himself!

That day, "the happiest of her life," was a day to regret; a day to forget—if she could forget it. Would the sun ever again shine as brightly? Would the woods ever seem so shadowy cool and inviting? Would the flowers ever be so fair and sweet?

She had loved the world and everything in it, and her blood had danced in her veins, and her feet had longed to dance, despite it being the Sab-

bath day; her very soul had seemed to sing with a joy as wide as eternity.

Now the sun was shining outside her window, but there was something gone from its golden glamour; her blood that had danced flowed chill in her body, and her heart was full with a pain too great for it to contain.

"A dream," she whispered dully—"nothing but a dream. It is over!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE BELL BOY

ON Wednesday Bancroft was to play again in Kingsbridge, and Thursday was to be the "middle of the week lay-off" for both the Bullies and the Kinks.

Tuesday's early mail brought Henry Cope a letter bearing the Bancroft postmark, and he opened it somewhat nervously. As he apprehended, it contained a communication from Anson Graham, president of the Northern League, giving notice that there would be held at the office of Rufus Kilgore, in Bancroft, on Thursday evening, at eight o'clock, a meeting of the league directors to consider the protest of Manager Riley relative to Paul Hazelton, "playing with Kingsbridge under the assumed name of Tom Locke."

"By gum!" growled the grocer disgustedly. "They actually do mean business. We're up ag'inst it. The boy better know 'bout this right away."

He found Locke making ready to start for Fryeburg, where the team was to play that afternoon

The young man seemed strangely depressed, and his face wore a deep frown as he read the notice, which Cope had handed him. The grocer anxiously regarded the expression on the pitcher's face.

"Well?" he asked, as Tom returned the notice.

"It is fortunate," said Locke grimly, "that I fancied this meeting might be called on short notice, and made preparations for it."

"Hey? You've made preparations?"

"Yes."

"Whut sort o' preparations?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Cope; I shall be ready for them, I think."

"Then you're dead sartin old Riley ain't got no holt on ye?"

"How many times," asked the young pitcher impatiently, "must I tell you so, Mr. Cope?"

"You know it's got round somehow that you've denied p'int-blank that you're Hazelton, and some folks—they's alwus that kind in ev'ry town—are sayin' they reckon you lied," stammered the grocer. "You ain't never denied that your name's Hazelton, have ye?"

Tom Locke frowned, but made no answer to the question.

"As fur's I'm concerned," said Cope, "when

they've tried to corner me, I've dodged or refused to answer. It's too bad, boy; I'm mighty sorry it's all goin' to come out who ye be, but 'twarn't my fault. I've kep' my part of our agreement."

"I haven't any doubt of that. It's simply the result of unfortunate circumstances and the determination of somebody to do me a bad turn. Mr. Cope, I'm not a trouble breeder, but, as you have used me square and I am genuinely interested in the team, I'm going to give you a tip to keep an eye on your manager. Nor does this come wholly, or even mainly, from the fact that I do not like him personally; I have reasons to believe that he is not on the level."

"Hum!" grunted the grocer; "we hired him on good recommendation, but I don't mind tellin' you privately that I've got a feelin' myself that he ain't to be trusted too fur. He's fer puttin' you on the bench until arter this fuss over you is settled, an' that don't sound good t' me. I want you to pitch agin' Bancroft ag'in to-morrer."

"And I want to pitch against them," said Tom warmly; "but you'll find that Hutchinson will object."

"As long as you insist that they can't count out the games that you win, I'm goin' to set on the bench myself an' see that you pitch to-morrer."

"Good! I hope I'm in my best form, for I hear that Riley has had his men batting industriously in practice against a left-handed pitcher. Being left-handed helped me against his left-handed hitters at first before I had them sized up; but I've made a study of them for weak spots, and, though they are called sluggers, he has no Wagners or Lajoies—men who can bump any kind of a ball that comes within reach of their bats. They have their failings, every one of them, and, with good control and good support, I should be able to take another fall out of them."

The door of the room had been left slightly ajar by Cope. Outside that door a hesitating bell boy stood listening to the talk of the two men. Hearing some one turn the knob of a door farther along the corridor, the boy hastily lifted his hand and knocked. At Locke's call, he pushed the door open, and entered.

"Hello, Sam," said the pitcher. "On the bed there—that suit needs pressing; take it to the tailor, will you, and tell him I want it back tonight? Here!"

He extended a silver half dollar, but the boy, who had gathered up the suit of dark-blue serge from the bed, drew back, looking confused.

"What's the matter, Sam?" asked Locke, a bit

impatiently. "You've been doing some little favors for me of late."

"I'd rather not take it, sir," said the boy, his lids lowered and his gaze on the floor. "I hope ye don't mind, sir."

"Why, I don't understand—"

"You—you was good to my little brother, Jimmy, when he cut his foot, and—and I'd rather not take anything, sir."

Locke laughed for the first time that day, slipping the piece of silver into the genuinely unwilling hand of the boy.

"I reckon I owe Jimmy and his friends something, instead of the shoe being on the other foot," he said enigmatically. "So Jimmy is your brother? I didn't know that. You haven't a high opinion of me as a pitcher, have you, Sam?"

"Oh, I was jest talkin' to hear myself talk," answered the boy quickly, his face turning crimson. "Did Jimmy tell you that?"

"I overheard it quite by accident. How's his foot?"

"Oh, he ain't caperin' round on it much yit; but it'll be all right pretty soon. I wisht you'd take this half back. Paw, he asked the doc, and the doc, he said there warn't nothin' t' pay for tendin' Jimmy's foot, 'cause you had paid; an' I'd

like ter do somethin' to sorter make it square."

"All right; keep the half now, and we'll begin afresh. Now that I know I can do it, I'll impose on you frightfully; I'll keep you hopping for me in great shape. Say, hustle along and get that suit to the tailor, or he'll not have it pressed for me to wear this evening; and I may want it." He swung the door wide open, pushed the boy out, and closed it behind him.

"Fust time," observed Henry Cope, "I ever knew a Bryant t' try to refuse money. They're a pretty shif'less, worthless bunch, that family."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"AND DID NOT UNDERSTAND"

A SHORT time later, with his playing suit in the hand bag he carried, Locke left the hotel and started for the railway station, where he would join the other members of the team, all of whom, save Hutchinson and himself, were stopping at a boarding house. As he swung down the street, Janet Harting came out of a store and turned toward him. He saw her, and his heart jumped. She saw him, and in a moment she turned squarely around and hastened the other way, vanishing beyond the first corner.

He knew she had seen him this time and deliberately avoided him; there could be no question about it. The evening before he had come upon her suddenly on the street, lifted his hat, and spoken; but she had passed on without a word or a token to betray that he had been observed.

Although it seemed impossible then that she had failed to see him, he was not positive; now, however, he knew, and the knowledge left him breathless and dazed. When he reached the cor-

ner beyond which she had disappeared she was far along the street, and hurrying as if in great fear that he would pursue her.

"It's too much for me," he murmured. "It's got me guessing. There's no getting around it, she dodged me. Why? She saw me last night, and did not speak. Why? I can hardly believe it of her. What have I done? She is the last person I'd ever fancied would do anything of the sort."

He did not long remain in doubt, for he was not a dull-witted man. The controversy about him was the cause of it all; she had heard what every one in Kingsbridge who took the slightest interest in baseball had heard, and she believed that he had spoken falsely to her. Impulsive, indignant, scornful, she wished to have nothing further to do with a man who could look straight into her eyes and tell her an untruth without a blush or as much as the turning of a hair.

"That's it," he said. "There's no other explanation. I must call on her this evening, after we get back, and tell her the straight truth."

The truth! If he had not been truthful, was he silly enough to fancy penitence would help him now?

The day proved tiresome and wretched for Tom

Locke, and it was far from satisfactory for his teammates, with Fryeburg winning through a ninth-inning rally that tied the score and a batting streak in the tenth which earned them the run they needed, with only one out. Stark, seeing the pitcher had wilted, and fearing the batters who were coming up, asked Hutchinson to call Lefty in to save the day; but the manager grimly refused.

The train bore the defeated players back to a late supper in Kingsbridge, for up there supper was the evening meal. On the way, Jack Hinkey asked if any one had heard anything about Bancroft's new pitcher, and the others confessed that they had not.

"Feller tole me t'-day," said Hinkey, "that Riley had signed a new twirler who'd be run in agin' us t'-morrer. An' he's a port-side flinger by the name of Craddock. Anybody ever hear of him?"

They confessed that they had not. Locke was the only man who did not answer. Sitting some seats ahead of the others and on the opposite side of the car, he was gazing glumly out at the whirling landscape, his face as dark as the purple shadows hovering at the base of a distant line of hills.

"Hey, Tom," called Larry Stark, "did you get what Hink was telling us?"

Locke started, shook himself a bit, and turned.

"I was thinking just then," he said. "What was it?"

They told him, and he acknowledged that he knew of no pitcher by the name of Craddock.

"They say he's a hot article," said Hinkey. "Feller that tole me 'bout him seemed to think we was goin' to git up ag'inst the real thing t'-morrer."

"What you tryin' to do," growled Sockamore, "frighten Lefty? Look at him. He's fergot about Craddock a'ready."

Locke was again gazing out of the window in a preoccupied, moody manner.

"Whut's the matter with him?" wondered Hunchy Oulds. "He's been like that 'most all day. He must be in love—or sick."

"Same t'ing," grinned Labelle.

"Hope he don't go gittin' off his feed now," muttered Hinkey. "He's due t' git his bumps some time, but I'd like ter see him pull through t'-morrer, 'specially if they do spring a new pitcher on us."

"Maybe," said Reddy Crandall, "Hutch won't work him to-morrow. I was told by a Fryeburger

that there was a meetin' comin' on for Thursday to settle whuther Lefty belongs to us or not, and maybe the games he's pitched won't be counted."

"They can't throw them out!" snapped Stark savagely. "They've got to count them. And if we lose Locke we're going to be in bad."

"You mean Hazelton, don't ye?" grinned Hinkey. "They say it's settled that that's his right name. As a rule, I don't think much of college guys, but I own up that Lefty is some pitcher, and we'll miss him."

Despite his words, his tone was not suggestive of worriment. Hinkey was one of the men brought to the team by Bob Hutchinson.

Tom Locke did not eat much that night. He hurried to the dining room at the Central Hotel. Two cups of coffee, hot and strong, made the greater part of his meal. They steadied him.

Dashing up to his room, he found the blue serge suit, freshly pressed and carefully laid out on his bed. It took him twenty minutes to make a complete change, even though he was possessed by an almost feverish desire to hurry. And, as a rule, when he hurried he could do it in half that time.

Taking a final peep at himself in the mirror, he extinguished the light and went out. When bidding him adieu on Sunday, the girl had invited him

to call some time, and he proposed to do so this evening.

As he drew near the parsonage, however, he faltered, and his pace slackened. She had shunned him upon the street; would she not refuse to see him now?

"She must give me a chance to explain," he muttered desperately. "Surely she'll do that. I can't believe she'll decline to see me for a few minutes, at least."

Locke's pulse beat rapidly. With his handkerchief he wiped his forehead. It was ridiculous, of course, for a man like him to flush and shiver like a big boy suffering from his first attack of calf love; but, try as he might, he could not steady himself as he approached the cottage and discovered that, though the curtains were drawn, there was a light in the parlor.

Perhaps Benton King was there! Well, what of it? Was he the man to turn back and leave the field to a rival? Were King there, it was all the more reason why he should make haste to put himself right in her eyes. His jaws set, he followed the walk to the front door, and rang.

One of the parlor windows, near by, was open, but the shade was drawn well down, so that anybody within the room could not be seen by a per-

son outside who might seek to look in. As he turned in from the street, he had fancied he caught the sound of voices drifting out through that window, and one was, he believed, that of Janet.

Presently the maid came, and he asked for Miss Harting. "I haven't a card," he said. "Please tell her it is Mr. Locke, who would like to see her a few minutes."

He was left standing in the hall, which was lighted by the soft glow of a shaded lamp. In a brief time the maid returned.

"Miss Harting is engaged," she said, "and cannot see you."

It seemed that his heart stopped beating, and he stood quite still, unwilling to believe it could be true. The maid opened the door. He passed out with the step of a somnambulist.

So, after all, she was that sort of a girl! Only the thoughtless and shallow render judgment without a proper hearing and an investigation. He had thought her something more than a girl easily swayed and swept away by every light, shifting wind; but it now seemed that he had invested her with imaginary qualities and a character which she did not possess.

The door closed behind him. His feet threatened to drag as he walked toward the gate. Sud-

denly he stiffened at the sound of a laugh heard through the open window. His teeth clicked, his hands clenched, and every nerve in his body seemed to jerk taut as a bowstring. King was there—laughing!

He had turned to face the window, and for a few seconds he stood perfectly rigid and motionless. He struck no pose, made no gesture; but he, too, laughed, silently.

"Last time we met," he breathed at length, "you called me a liar, Benton King, and I held myself. If you were to repeat that word to me to-night, I'd knock you down in your tracks."

His step was steady enough now as he walked away. For a moment he thought of returning to the hotel and writing her a letter, stating the truth briefly; but he dismissed the idea almost immediately.

"She'll find out in time," he said; "for the whole of Kingsbridge will know after the meeting Thursday night. When she does find out, perhaps she'll be sorry for her mistake, but it will be too late."

CHAPTER XXXIX

BANCROFT COMES TO CONQUER

NEVER before, even though it was the middle of the week, had such a crowd of Bancroft fans accompanied the team to a neighboring town. When the train stopped they began hopping off the cars, like fleas from the back of a cat to which insect powder has been applied, and in a few moments the station platform was packed with them, laughing, joking, confident of what the afternoon held in store.

In short order they swarmed into every restaurant in town. Having satisfied their hunger, they went forth into the streets of Kingsbridge to wait for the hour of the game, some of them to seek citizens who were willing to back the local team with real money.

But Fancy Dyke and two associates, provided with rolls of the "long green," had struck Kingsbridge by an earlier train and raked the place for bets with a fine-tooth comb. Kingsbridgers who had money they were willing to risk sought the assurance of Henry Cope that Tom Locke would

pitch; and, with this guarantee, they proceeded to "take a chance."

Before the gates opened that afternoon, more money had been posted than ever before on a single game in the Northern League. For, while the milltown people had heard that the Bullies would present a new left-handed slabman, the promise that Locke would do the tossing for the Kinks left them still with a feeling of assurance undisturbed by the least uncertainty.

Not that they believed there was no chance of losing, but their faith in Lefty was so great that it seemed at least a five to-one shot in Kingsbridge's favor; and a man who would "squeeze his roll" with such an opportunity staring him in the face certainly lacked sporting blood.

That afternoon, as the hour of the game drew on, only the unyielding strictness of foremen and bosses kept the mills running, the workmen almost threatening to desert in a body. Some of them slipped away, even though they knew they were inviting discharge by doing so.

Naturally, the curiosity to see Bancroft's new pitcher was very great, and there was a mighty craning of necks on the bleachers and in the stand when the visitors appeared for practice.

The man whose name had been given as Crad-

dock was easily seen, being over six feet in height, and having amazingly long arms and legs; in fact, he seemed to be nearly all arms and legs. He was not a handsome person, with a hatchet face and a huge beak of a nose, while his ears stood out like fans on either side of his long, narrow head. He carried his shoulders hunched forward, and walked with a queer bobbing movement of the knees, a sort of buckling with each step. In more ways than one his appearance was suggestive of a crane.

Craddock warmed up without letting himself loose at all, giving the eager watchers no chance to get an idea of his capability by anything in that preliminary performance.

With the appearance of the home team, Hutchinson sprang a surprise. A new man came on the field with them, a bronzed, husky, rawboned man, who quickly set the crowd to speculating as to his identity. When the local pitchers began limbering their wings, one question was quickly answered; for when the stranger commenced to warm up, also, it was seen that he was a pitcher; and many a Kingsbridger hoped he would prove to be better than either Deever or Skillings.

Mike Riley, smoking industriously, stood around with his hands in his pockets, watching his players in a self-satisfied manner. His bearing was more

than encouraging for those who had journeyed thirty miles to see the Bullies win. After a time, he walked over and spoke to Hutchinson. They talked earnestly for several minutes, Riley making gestures with his clenched fist and nodding his head savagely, while Hutch shrugged his shoulders repeatedly.

When the Kingsbridge manager turned toward the local bench, he found Henry Cope standing near it.

"Well," said the grocer, "what did old Riley have t' say? Tried ter browbeat ye, didn't he?"

"Oh," said Hutchinson, "he reasserted his claim to Hazelton, and said we'd surely lose this game out of the count if we persisted in pitching the man. You can see, Cope, that it's no bluff; the meeting is called for to-morrow night. I've got Ringling, a new pitcher, here, and he's clever. Don't you think we'd better use him?"

"I notified you," said the grocer irritably, "that Locke would pitch this game, and he'll pitch it. Put him in."

"All right," growled Hutchinson, in exasperation, "have your own way." As he sat down on the bench, he added to himself: "You pig-headed old fool!"

So it was Locke who went on the slab when the

umpire called "play," and Bancroft promptly sent Harney jogging forth to the pan with his pet bat on his shoulder. Tom was given a rousing cheer by his admirers.

"You know what to do to 'em, Lefty," yelled a man on the bleachers. "You're the boy fer us. We're backin' you."

Harney drove his spikes into the dry ground and squared himself, his bat held high and ready. His posture was that of a man who welcomed speed, and rather preferred that the ball should be up around his shoulders; therefore, Locke opened with one across his knees on the inside corner. True, Harney hit it promptly, but he only batted a weak grounder into the diamond, and Labelle, grabbing it quickly, whipped him out at first by a wide margin.

"Just as easy as ever!" whooped a delighted Kingsbridger. "Pick off the next one, Tommy, old top."

Trollop held his bat low, so Locke kept the ball high and close, causing it to jump, and the Bancroft center fielder slashed at three without making even a foul.

"Some pitchin', Lefty, some pitchin'!" was the cry.

Wop Grady, his face knotted and puckered, as

usual, slammed at the first one handed him, and hoisted a high foul, which Oulds smothered close to the wire netting that protected the people in the stand; and Kingsbridge gave Locke a cheer that resembled a cowboy yell more than anything else.

Every eye seemed to be turned on Bancroft's new pitcher as he teetered awkwardly out upon the diamond. The ball was thrown to him, and he whipped three or four scorchers to Harney, at first, before Labelle was ready to bat; but not until he toed the slab to pitch to the batter did he put his remarkable delivery on exhibition.

Suddenly he swung far backward, pivoting on his left foot and shooting his right arm and right leg into the air, while his left hand carried the ball far, far over until it seemed that he was trying to touch the ground with it. Up he came and forward on to his right foot, his pitching hand sweeping through the air to send the ball burning across a corner of the pan.

"*Nom de tonnerre!*" gasped Labelle, his eyes bulging, his bat hanging poised.

"Strike!" cried the umpire.

CHAPTER XL

PINWHEEL MURTEL

THE great Bancroft crowd laughed. They had come to Kingsbridge to see their new southpaw show the Kinks something about pitching. Incidentally they had made arrangements to take home with them various sums of money which the foolish Kingsbridgers had wagered on their team.

Bangs whipped the ball back, and Craddock again went through with that remarkable delivery, looking, as one man expressed it, "as though he was all arms 'n' legs." Again the ball bit a corner off the plate, and Labelle, fascinated by the pitcher's gyrations, swung too late.

The only delay was that caused by the movements of Craddock preliminary to pitching, and he did not waste a single "teaser" on the Kinks' first hitter. The third one was high, with a sharp slant on it, and the little Canadian whiffed out.

"There's pitchin' fur ye!" yelled a Bancrofter. "What d'ye think o' *that?*"

"*Nom de tonnerre!*" said Labelle again, as he

retired to the bench. "Where he come from, de circus?'

Stark, following, fouled three times, but eventually the Bancrofter twirler outguessed him, and sent him, fanned, to take his place beside Labelle.

"Whut's he got?" asked Reddy Crandall, pawing among the bats.

"Curves and speed," answered Larry, in a low tone. "Don't get to watching his delivery and forget to watch the ball. Go to him! He can be hit."

But Reddy could not hit him that time, and the Bancroft crowd howled as their new projector fanned the third man in succession. There were some who began to prophesy that the Kinks would be shut out without a hit on their own field. There are always wise heads who make foolish prophecies early in every game.

The second inning opened with Bancroft's left-handed hitters coming up, and Locke, knowing they had been practicing against a left-handed pitcher, worked with the utmost care and judgment, his change of speed being most effective, as it caused two of the four men who faced him to bump weak grounders into the diamond, to their complete undoing.

With two down, Bernsteine, standing well back

from the plate, with a long bat grasped near the end, stepped into a "roundhouse," and lined out a pretty single. It did no good, however, for Lisotte banged a grasser into the clinging paws of Labelle, and Bernsteine was out at second on a force.

"You all hit him, boys," cried a Bancroft man. "You'll straighten 'em out by and by, and lose the balls over in the slashings at the foot of Bald Mountain. He's due to get his bumps."

Craddock continued his remarkable work, and, one after the other, Anastace, Hinkey, and Lace were mowed down, even as their comrades had fallen in the first round.

The Bullies were urged to fall on Locke, and Bangs led off with a long drive to center, which Sockamore retrieved on the fly. Craddock did not seem to be strong with the club, and he made a laughable exhibition by seeking to hit the low ones on the inside corner, where Locke kept the ball for a strike-out. Harney got one to his fancy, through a momentary lapse on the part of Locke, but, by tall hustling out in the left garden, Reddy Crandall picked the globule out of the air.

"You're hittin' him now," declared the encouraging Bancroft fan. "Keep it up; they can't get 'em all. You'll put the blanket on him yet."

The delight of the visitors may be imagined as Craddock finished Kingsbridge's list by handing the last three men upon it the same medicine he had given the first six. Three innings had passed, nine men had faced him, and not one of them had even hit the ball into the diamond. It began to seem that the man who had prophesied no hits and no runs for the Kinks might not be such a fool, after all.

Locke's manner was almost trancelike as he toed the slab at the beginning of the fourth. His first ball was wide, but Trollop caught the second one on the seam and pounded it for two sacks, bringing the Bancroft rooters up, roaring. They continued to roar, as Grady bunted and sacrificed Trollop to third, where, with only one out, he was in position to score on the squeeze play if the Bullies saw fit to try it.

They did try it, but, knowing what was coming, Locke pitched to Mace high and close, and Mace bumped a little pop fly straight into Lefty's hands. Holding the ball a moment, Locke smiled at Trollop, who made ludicrous efforts to stop and turn back toward third. The roaring of the Bancrofters died away in a disappointed groan as they saw the ball tossed to Fred Lace for the third put-out.

"Oh, this is something of a game!" crowed

Stark, capering toward the bench. "It's about time we came to life and touched that gangling port-sider up a few. Stop watching his contortions, Labelle. This is no vaudeville performance; you're here to play baseball. Try to hit him, anyhow."

"You bet!" growled the Canadian. "I hit de ball dis time; you watch."

Nevertheless, although he slashed viciously, he did not graze the first one.

Suddenly Reddy Crandall, who had spent his time on the bench staring at the long-geared pitcher, struck his thigh a resounding slap.

"I've got him!" he declared excitedly. "I've spotted that guy! I know him now! Craddock, hey? No wonder them Bancrofters come up to this town to-day loaded with bettin' money. Craddock! Why, that's 'Pinwheel' Murtel, of the National League, as good a man as Matty himself, only he's got a rotten disposition, an' no manager can handle him. He's been blacklisted and outlawed time after time, but he's such a wonder they always fix it up somehow, an' take him back when he wants to come. That's Murtel, I'll bet my life on it. Fellers, we'll never score to-day with *him* pitchin'."

Stark, standing near, had ceased to swing the

two bats he had picked up, listening to the excited words of Crandall. He had never seen the famous and eccentric Pinwheel Murtel, but he had heard a great deal about the man, as, doubtless, had every other baseball player in the country.

"By Jove!" he muttered, having turned to stare at the lengthy twirler. "I believe you're right, Reddy."

"I *know* I'm right," said Crandall. "I've been trying to figure out who the man was, and I've got him at last. At his best, he can walk any three of us without a man down and then keep us from scoring. This game is as good as settled, and a lot of Kingsbridge sports have lost some good money to-day."

"Nonsense, Crandall!" said Locke swiftly. "Even if the man *is* Pinwheel Murtel, he isn't invincible."

"There goes Pete ag'in," said Reddy, as Labelle fanned out the second time. "Nobody's even touched him."

"What of it? The best pitchers in the business can be hit."

"But not by batters in our class."

"Yes, sometimes they can be hit by batters in our class. Mathewson has been batted and beaten by a scrub country team, at least once, according

to his own confession; and other top-notch pitchers have met the same treatment, much to their surprise.

"We're going to fight this game through to the last ditch, I hope, whether that man is Murtel or not. There's no knowing what may happen. At any rate, if I can hold them down, and you fellows keep on giving me the support you have, they may not get any runs. We're not going to quit, are we, just because we've found out that Craddock is Murtel?"

"No," rasped Jim Sockamore, the Indian, "we won't quit! You're right, Lefty; mebbe we'll beat that bunch yet, if we support you."

It was plain, however, that Crandall's discovery had taken the courage out of him, and it seemed to fade away entirely as Stark, also, fanned. Reddy stood up to the plate with his heart in his shoes and swung apathetically, being sliced down without waste of energy on the part of the pitcher.

CHAPTER XLI

GONE WRONG

LOCKE muttered a single word of disgust as he rose from the bench and walked toward the pitcher's slab. On the way he stopped suddenly, staring for an instant toward some teams and automobiles down beyond the far end of the third-base bleachers. Then he walked onward, but some of the flush was gone from his face.

Hutchinson, sitting silent on the bench, had done little toward directing his players. Should the game go against Kingsbridge, as he believed it would, he was prepared to answer criticism by saying that Henry Cope's interference had made it impossible for him to rely on his own judgment and generalship.

Long before Crandall named the Bancroft pitcher, Hutch was wise to the man. He had likewise observed that Locke did not seem as efficient as usual, although good support had prevented the Bullies from hammering out runs.

"When the break comes," thought the rascally

manager, "it's dollars to doughnuts they'll get his goat for fair."

The Kingsbridge pitcher looked ill as he found the slab at the beginning of the fifth; his face was pale and set, and there was something like a glare in his eyes. He seemed to be in haste to hand Pat McGovern a pass, pitching one ball after another without pausing to steady down, though both Oulds and Stark begged him to take more time; and not one of the four he threw for Pat even grazed a corner.

Following this, he bored Bernsteine in the ribs, and two men were on the sacks, with no one down. Remembering the first game Locke had pitched on that field, the Kingsbridge crowd declined to be frightened.

"He'll steady down in a moment," they said. "Just watch him."

But in a moment McGovern and Bernsteine each moved up a sack on a weirdly wild pitch to Lisotte.

Hutchinson turned quickly to Ringling.

"Shake the kinks out of your arm, Ring," he directed. "Hurry up about it."

Oulds had called Locke, meeting him a few steps in front of the pan.

"What's biting you now, son?" he growled, heedless of the howling Bancrofters, who were de-

manding that the umpire should keep the game going. "You've got the wabbles; I don't believe you can see the rubber."

He wondered at the look in Tom's eyes. Locke moistened his dry lips.

"Yes, yes, Oulds," he said huskily; "I'm all right now."

"Well, you don't look it," retorted Hunchy. "Be you havin' a fit, or what? You've got to stop heavin' the ball as fast as you can git holt of it. Take your time, now. Don't let Lisotte bunt; prob'ly he'll try it. If they start scorin', they're li'ble to win the game right here."

"I tell you I'm all right now," declared Locke savagely. "Give me the ball."

"He's havin' a reg'ler fit," muttered the catcher, surrendering the sphere and backing toward his position behind the pan.

Lisotte squared himself again; the coachers talked excitedly, the Bancroft crowd rooted for runs; Kingsbridge was silent. Bernsteine took a long lead off second, and McGovern danced back and forth at third. Locke was taking time at last, apparently trying hard to throw off the feverish wildness that had put him into "a hole."

Swift, high, and close came the ball to Lisotte, difficult indeed to bunt safely. But the little Ca-

nuck did not try to bunt; instead, as if he knew just what was due, he met the sphere with a snappy swing, driving it humming into the field between center and right.

McGovern danced gayly to the scoring station, Bernsteine following with a rush. There was a wild riot on the Bancroft bleachers, men leaping up and down, flinging their hats into the air and yelling themselves purple in the face; for, with two runs scored, no one out, Locke apparently all to the bad, and Pinwheel Murtel in Big League form, it seemed that the game had been clinched for the Bullies.

Since coming on the field, Tom Locke had been looking for Janet Harting; somehow he was confident she would attend this game. It is likely that thoughts of her had disturbed him and prevented him from concentrating upon the work of pitching, although he had not been aware of it.

Walking out to take his position at the beginning of the fifth, however, his searching eyes discovered her blue parasol, and, beneath it, Janet, sitting at the side of Benton King in the same carriage in which he had first beheld her. As Locke looked, King seemed to be returning his gaze. The pitcher saw Bent lean toward the girl and say something, whereupon both laughed. For the

time being Tom lost his head, greatly to the advantage of the rejoicing Bancrofters.

He knew it; no one on that field knew it better. And nothing could have served better to sober him and bring him to his senses than that wicked, timely line drive by Lisotte. He saw Ringling warming up and Hutchinson talking to Henry Cope, who plainly was not feeling right. Of course, the manager was asking permission—or demanding it—to remove him immediately from the game.

"I'm a fool!" thought Tom. "I have played right into that rascal's hand."

CHAPTER XLII

A SUDDEN SHIFT

HE hoped Cope would not yield. Perhaps the damage was done already, but he would try to redeem himself if they did not bench him.

Hutchinson was saying:

"What's the use to keep him in, man alive? He's lost the game already."

"If he's lost the game," returned the obstinate grocer, "what's the use to take him out? I don't see no sense in that. Let him pitch some more. He braced up t'other time; mebbe he will ag'in."

Speechless with exasperation, Hutchinson turned back and reseated himself on the bench. Seeing this, and understanding that Locke would continue yet a while on the firing line, Stark ran to him, grasped him with both hands, and spoke in swift, yet steady, tones:

"Pull yourself together, Lefty; you've got to do it, and you can. Bangs is easy, and that man Murtel can't hit a balloon. Put the ball over, and

take chances with them; we're behind you. Don't hurry, and keep your head."

Tom gave the disturbed captain a reassuring smile.

"I know I ought to be sent to the stable," he said; "but I'll do my level best now. Watch me."

Bingo Bangs was not much of a hitter, and the crowd saw Lefty whip the ball through a single groove three times in succession, and three times the Bullies' catcher hammered the air. After the third strike, the ball having been returned by Oulds, Locke caught a quick signal from the backstop, and wheeled, to flash the sphere like a shot into the hands of Labelle, who had dodged past the runner.

Labelle nailed Lisotte, and the two Canadians exchanged courtesies in choice patois. This second swift putout awoke some of the saddened Kingsbridgers, their sudden yells of satisfaction mingling with the groans of the Bancrofters.

"*Now* we're all right!" cried Larry Stark. "Take a fall out of old Pinwheel, Lefty. We'll make a game of this yet."

Locke's nerves were growing steadier. He had forced himself to dismiss every thought of the girl who had treated him so shabbily, and the man, her companion, who had flung him an insult and

escaped a thrashing. Until the last inning was over he would concentrate his energies upon the work in hand.

As before, the Bancroft pitcher's efforts to connect with Locke's slants were laughable; he could not touch the ball, even to foul it.

"Hold them down now, Craddock," begged Fancy Dyke from the bleachers. "They shut us out last time we was here; let's return the compliment to-day."

Murtel grinned; thus far he had seen nothing that would lead him to doubt his ability to hold the Kinks runless. Nor was he ruffled when Anastace got a scratch hit from him in the last of the fifth; for the three following batters were like putty in his hands.

On the part of Kingsbridge there was uncertainty and anxiety as Locke returned to the slab, for now the head of Bancroft's list, the best hitters of the team, were coming up to face him, and they were full of confidence. There were times, it seemed, when Lefty was sadly erratic, and were he to slump again in this game the faith of his admirers would be much impaired.

Never had Tom Locke put more brains into his pitching. He had a speed ball that smoked, and his curves broke as sharply keen as a razor's edge;

furthermore, he "mixed them up" cleverly, his change of pace proving most baffling, and his slow ball always seeming to come loafing over just when the hitter was looking for a whistler.

Harney snarled his annoyance after fanning; Trollop almost broke his back bumping one of the slow ones into the clutches of Labelle; Grady lifted a miserable foul back of first for Hinkey to gobble.

Hutchinson had temporarily deserted the bench, and the Kinks came trotting in. Observing this, Locke grabbed Stark, and whispered something in his ear, Larry listening and nodding.

"It won't hurt to try it," said the captain. "Here, Oulds."

It was the catcher's turn to lead off. He listened to Stark's repetition of Locke's suggestion; then he stepped out to the plate, slipped his hands up on the bat a bit as Murtel pitched, and bunted the first ball.

The Bullies were taken by surprise. The ball rolled slowly down just inside the third-base line, and Oulds, leaping away like a streak, actually turned that bunt into a safe base hit, to the complaints of the Bancroft spectators and the whooping merriment of the Kingsbridgers.

Locke was promptly in position, and he followed with a bunt toward first. Even as the bunt was

made the bat seemed to fall from his hands, and he was off like a shot toward the initial sack, leaping over the rolling ball as he went. Only by the liveliest kind of hustling did Murtel get the sphere up and snap it humming past the runner in time to get an assist on Harney's put-out.

Oulds was on second. Labelle, grinning, hopped into the batter's box, and astonished the spectators of the game, and the Bancroft players, as well, by contributing the third bunt, which was so wholly unexpected that he reached first by a narrow margin. And now the Kingsbridge crowd was making all the noise, the Bancrofters seeming stricken dumb with apprehension.

Murtel was angry, a fact he could not hide. For the first time he seemed, with deliberate intent, to keep the first ball pitched beyond the reach of the batter. Oulds, of course, had anchored temporarily at third, and Labelle, taking a chance, tried to steal on that pitch.

Bangs made a line throw, but Lisotte, seeing Oulds dash off third, cut it down, only to discover that the tricky Kingsbridge catcher had bluffed. The Frenchman failed in an attempt to pin the runner before he could dive back to the sack.

Locke had taken Crandall's place on the coaching line back of third, giving Reddy a chance to

get his bat, as he was the hitter who followed Stark; and it was the play to keep the ball rolling as fast as possible. Tom was laughing and full of ginger, his words of instruction to the runners sometimes sounding clear above the uproar of the excited crowd.

"Keep it up! Keep it up!" he called. "Get off those cushions! Take a lead, and score! *Look out!*" Murtel had made an attempt to catch Labelle by a quick throw, but the little Canadian slid under McGovern's arm.

CHAPTER XLIII

A GAME WORTH WINNING

LOCKE had forgotten the blue parasol and its owner; he had no fleeting thought for Benton King; he was heart and soul in the game.

With one out, it seemed an excellent time for Kingsbridge to keep up the bunting, and attempt to score on it by the "squeeze," so Bancroft's infield drew closer and the outfielders quickly came in.

At the plate, Stark gave a secret signal, changing the style of play, and then he set the local crowd frantic by meeting Murtel's high one on the trade mark. With the outfielders playing in their usual places, that line drive would have been good for a clean single, but while they were chasing it down, Larry dug all the way round to third, Oulds and Labelle romping over the rubber with the runs that tied the score.

The whole Kingsbridge team was laughing, now, while Murtel, enraged over being outguessed and deceived, was almost frenzied.

"It's a great top piece you have, Lefty, old pal," cried Larry Stark. "That was the trick to get 'em going. Look at Pinwheel champ the bit."

But Hutchinson was back on the bench now, and he directed Crandall to hit the ball out. Reddy, trying to respond manfully, boosted an infield fly, and Stark was forced to remain on the sack while it was caught. Had Anastace, coming next, taken a daring chance and bunted, it is possible that the Bullies might have been thrown into confusion again; but he had orders from Hutchinson to hit, and in trying to do so he succumbed to Murtel's strategy, expiring in the box.

"Oh, this is some game, believe me!" shouted a Kingsbridger. "Hold 'em where they are, Lefty. You've got the stuff to do it. We depend on you."

The Bancrofters who had wagered money on the tussle were not as cocksure as they had been, and doubtless more than one, Manager Riley included, regretted that matters had not been privately arranged in advance so that it would not be necessary to rely almost wholly on the prowess of their new left-handed pitcher.

Surely their regrets became still more acute when, in the seventh, Locke showed no let-up in form, and was not even ruffled when McGovern

reached first on an infield error, the other three batters to face him going the way of all flesh.

"Oh, you Lefty!" was once more the rejoicing cry of the palpitating Kingsbridgers.

Murtel came back with a shut-out, although Hinkey led off with a scratch hit.

"Hold 'em, Lefty—hold 'em!" was the beseeching cry.

Bangs and Murtel faded like morning dew before a burning sun, but Harney got into a speedy one and banged it for two hassocks, setting the shaking Bancrofters off again in a tremendous uproar. Nevertheless, the lucky batter remained at second, where Stark and Labelle kept him dancing back and forth while Locke took Trollop's measure and put him away until the next game should be played.

With no one batting ahead of him, Locke advanced to the pan in the last of the eighth without instructions. The first ball was too close, but the second came slanting over, and he bunted. Again it was the unexpected, and never had a prettier bunt been pulled off. Nevertheless, it was only Tom's wonderful knack of starting at high speed with the first jump and covering the ground like a streak that enabled him to reach the sack a gasping breath ahead of the ball.

"Safe!" cried the umpire.

The Bullies started to kick, nearly every man on the team taking part in it. The crowd hooted and hissed, but it was only the nerve of the umpire in pulling his watch which finally sent the Bancroft players, growling, back to their positions. There was so much money wagered on the game that they could not afford to lose it through forfeiture; but henceforth they badgered the umpire on almost every decision, even scoffing when he declared in their favor.

Labelle sacrificed Locke to second. Stark, thirsting for a hit, hoisted a fly to center. Then, just as the visitors were breathing easier, Crandall smashed a drive into right field.

Locke was on the way to third even before bat and ball met. Sockamore, coaching, seeing Tom coming like the wind, took a desperate chance, and, with a furious flourish of his arms, signaled for him to keep on. Out in right field Mace got the sphere and poised himself for a throw to the pan.

There was a choking hush. Staring, breathless, suffering with suspense, the watchers waited.

"Slide!" yelled Sockamore, with a shriek like the blast of a locomotive whistle.

Spikes first, Locke slid. The whistling ball spanked into Bangs' clutches and he lunged to

make the tag. But Tom's feet had slipped across the rubber, and the downward motion of the umpire's open, outspread hand declared him safe.

Again the Bullies protested, and again the umpire was compelled to produce his watch. With difficulty the excited crowd was kept off the field.

Laughing, Stark had helped Locke to rise, and made a show of brushing some of the dust from him.

"It's your game that wins to-day, if you can hold them down now," declared Larry. "It was bunting when they weren't expecting it that did the trick. Oh, say, there'll be some sore heads in Bancroft to-night!"

Henry Cope came bursting out of the crowd back of the bench to shake hands with Locke.

"Sufferin' Moses, whut a game!" he exclaimed. "If I ain't under the doctor's care ter-morrer it'll be queer. Keep 'em right where they be, an' we've won."

"Lots of good that will do us when the game is counted out of the series," sneered Hutchinson.

"Even if they count it out," returned the grocer, "folks round this town're goin' to have a heap o' Bancroft's money t' spend."

Reddy Crandall did not score. He had done

his part well, and he uttered no complaint when Anastace failed to hit.

The Bullies had not given up. Savage, sarcastic, insolent, they fought it out in the first of the ninth, bearing themselves, until the last man was down, as if they still believed they would win. Locke, however, had them at his mercy, refusing to prolong the agony by letting a hitter reach first.

With some difficulty he fought off the delighted Kingsbridgers who swarmed, cheering, around him, and would have lifted him to their shoulders. When he finally managed to break clear of the throng he thought suddenly of Janet, and looked round for her.

Benton King was driving toward the gate by which teams and autos were admitted to the field. She had lowered her parasol, and, before disappearing through the gate, she turned to gaze backward, as if looking for some one in the midst of the still-cheering crowd that covered the diamond.

CHAPTER XLIV

FACING HIS ACCUSERS

SEASONABLE July weather caused discomfort for the seven persons assembled in the dingy office of Rufus Kilgore for the purpose of attending the meeting called to consider Manager Mike Riley's claims. Riley himself, in his shirt sleeves, sat with his back toward one of the wide-open windows, a handkerchief tucked round his neck inside his collar, grumbling and smoking. Anson Graham, president of the league, a serious, middle-aged man, with block-trimmed whiskers, who had the look of one who might be just, but would rarely temper his justice with mercy, was talking to Kilgore, the secretary of the organization, who occupied the chair at the desk.

David Farman and William Jones, representing Fryeburg and Lakeport, respectively, were aimlessly discussing various topics, such as the weather, crop prospects, and the ardent desire that the usual number of boarders from the city might be netted by the blandishments of adver-

tisements which pictured the part of the country in which they were interested as a summer Eden. Benton King, appearing restless, talked in low tones to the ever-icy Bob Hutchinson.

"Confound it!" growled Riley, looking at his watch. "Where's Hen Cope 'n' that man Hazelton? It's one minute of time fur the meetin' to begin, 'n' they oughter be here."

"Perhaps they won't come," said the lawyer. "Cope is a mule, and he may try to block proceedings by staying away."

"But he can't do that," rasped Mike. "We can go ahead without him. It's time. Hadn't you better call the meetin' to order, Mr. Graham?"

At this moment, footsteps were heard on the stairs, and the door opened, to admit the puffing Kingsbridge grocer, who paused to remove his hat, mop his shining, moist dome, and look the assemblage over.

"Good evenin', ever'body," he said pleasantly "On time, ain't I?"

"Just about, an' that's all," answered Riley. "Where's th' slip'ry guy that's caused all this trouble?"

"You mean Locke? Ain't he here?"

"I mean Hazelton, 'n' he ain't here."

"That's strange," said Cope, plainly a trifle

disturbed. "He lef' Kingsbridge on the early train this mornin', sayin' that he'd meet me here to-night. I thought sure I'd find him waitin'."

"Left town, hey?" cried Riley. "Left town this mornin'! Well, I swear! So help me, he's skipped!"

He was not the only one through whose head had passed the same thought, but Henry Cope immediately raised an agitated protest against such an idea, asserting his belief that the absent man would put in an appearance. They were induced to wait a while, although it was likely that Cope was the only one who was not satisfied that time was being wasted. In his heart, even the grocer began to doubt.

As the minutes ticked away, Cope looked anxious, Riley smoked and growled, Hutchinson remained cool, and Benton King fidgeted. Finally Anson Graham said:

"Gentlemen, it is now ten minutes past the time set for this meeting to be called, and I think we had better proceed without further delay; for it seems that the party accused does not intend to appear in his own defense. If you will please come to order, the secretary will read the protest of Manager Riley which led to—"

Breathless and anxious, Henry Cope had been

listening to the sound of hurried footsteps on the stairs, and now, as the door was thrust open and the tardy one stepped in, he gave an exclamation of great relief and satisfaction.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said Tom Locke, his face flushed. "I believe I am somewhat late, but it was the fault of my watch, which I have discovered is slow. I hope I have not kept you waiting long."

He bowed to everybody in a general, pleasant way, smiling on Cope, who had sprung forward to grip his hand.

"I knowed you'd come," said the grocer. "I told them you'd be here. Now, gents, you can go ahead."

A hard gleam had appeared in the eyes of Tom Locke as he noted the presence of Benton King, but, after the first swift glance, he ignored the lumberman's son.

The meeting was called to order in the regular manner, and Kilgore read the written protest of Manager Riley, which, as it appeared, had privately been formally worded by the lawyer himself. The document curtly charged that "the baseball player passing under the name of Tom Locke and appearing as a member of the Kingsbridge team of the Northern League" was in

reality Paul Hazelton, of Princeton, and made the claim that, because of "unterminated negotiations," Riley held an indisputable right to the man's services. Locke's face wore a half-mocking smile as he listened to the reading.

"You have heard the charge, sir," said Anson Graham, turning to Tom. "What answer have you to make?"

This was the moment Cope had dreaded, but his pitcher had given assurance that he would be ready to meet every charge, and he waited now, his lips parted, for the young man to answer. His surprise, however, amounted to something bordering on consternation when Locke quietly replied:

"It seems to me, Mr. President, that the first duty of the man who makes this charge is to establish that I am the party referred to in the document."

"Huh!" grunted Riley, without regard for the regular order of procedure. " 'Twon't do ye no good to deny it. We've got the proof."

"Pardon me, Riley," said Graham reprovingly; "I am questioning the young man. Do you deny, sir, that you are Paul Hazelton, of Princeton?"

"Yes, sir," was the prompt, clear answer, "I deny it."

Henry Cope nearly fell off his chair. In great agitation, he reached out, grasped the speaker's coat, tugged at it, and whispered:

"Boy, boy, be keerful! It's too late for that to do any good."

The dismay of the grocer was apparent to all, and provoked some smiles; but the unruffled young man simply turned and spoke to him in a low, calm tone:

"Leave this to me, Mr. Cope, please."

"In that case," said the president, maintaining an impartial manner, "it will be necessary for Manager Riley to produce satisfactory evidence that you *are* Paul Hazelton. Mr. Riley, your evidence."

"I've got it," asserted Mike positively. "Mr. King can show somethin' that'll settle the matter in short order."

CHAPTER XLV

THE FORGERY

BENTON KING, called upon, rose and expressed regret that circumstances had involved him in the unfortunate affair. He spoke hurriedly, without looking at Locke, although he was well aware that Tom's eyes were fixed upon him all the while.

At the first sight of Kingsbridge's left-handed pitcher, he stated, he had been struck by the thought that he had seen the man somewhere before, and, after racking his brain, he suddenly recalled that it was at a game played the previous year, between Princeton and Harvard, when Locke, to use the name he had given in Kingsbridge, had sat in uniform upon the Princeton bench.

He went on to explain, with an effort to hide any personal animosity in the matter, that the man's denial that he was Hazelton had led him to communicate with a friend in New York, requesting this friend to go to Princeton for the purpose of obtaining the photograph of the college pitcher.

This the friend had done, getting the picture from the photographer who was generally patronized by the undergraduates. Concluding, King produced the photograph and the letter that had accompanied it in the same mail, and placed them in evidence.

Locke listened and watched, without making a movement, a scornful smile on his lips. He heard the letter read by King, and saw it turned over, with the picture, to Anson Graham. The president glanced at the letter, then seemed to make a comparison of the photographed features and those of the young man standing so enigmatically cool beside the chair of Henry Cope.

"Sir," said Graham, extending the picture, "do you deny that this is your likeness?"

Locke barely glanced at it.

"It is my picture," he acknowledged.

"And that," exulted Mike Riley, "*does* settle it! He's Hazelton, and here's a letter from him, dated December twenty-seven, last year, answering a letter o' mine, in which I offered him twenty-five a week and board to pitch fer Bancroft this season, a-sayin' he wanted forty 'n' board. Take notice that he don't say he won't play for twenty-five, but that it's jest a clever try to boost me t' forty. I base my claim on that letter.

"I cal'late this smooth guy, who's had the nerve to stan' up here an' practically swear that he ain't Paul Hazelton, used my offer to boost his value with Mr. Cope, who, I hear, is payin' him outer all reason. Sneaky, underhand work, I call it. Such a man is dang'r'us, an' I hope that he will be put on the blacklist so that he won't be able to play on any team in the league. That's the way to fix him."

"I would like," said Locke, "the privilege of examining that letter."

"Let him see it arter the rest have seen it," said Riley. " 'Twon't do him no good t' destroy it."

"I have no desire to destroy it," declared Tom, when the letter presently reached his hands and he had glanced it over. "On the contrary, I have a most powerful desire to preserve it carefully; for it is a miserable forgery, and it would give me no little satisfaction to see the scoundrels responsible for its production properly prosecuted for a criminal offense."

"Bah!" snarled Riley. "More of his bluffin'. He must think we're fools t' let him put over anything like that on us. He's trapped, an' he can't wiggle outer it. Mr. President, I urge immediate action on my protest, and I hope the directors of

the league will put Mr. Paul Hazelton on the blacklist."

Again Henry Cope tugged at Locke's coat skirts; he looked pitifully downcast and disheartened.

"You tole me," he whispered dolefully, "that you had it on 'em somehow, but it seems t' me that they've got it on you."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Cope," was the cool reply; "this meeting is not over, and there is something mighty interesting yet to come." He turned to the others. "Mr. President, I have some witnesses, waiting outside at my request, whom I ask leave to introduce. I will call them."

Stepping swiftly to one of the open windows, he thrust his head out and called. Directly footsteps were again heard on the stairs. The door was flung open to admit Sam Bryant, the bell boy of the Central Hotel at Kingsbridge, followed by a stranger, who did not seem more than twenty years of age. The entrance of the boy appeared, for once, at least, to jostle Bob Hutchinson out of his usual unemotional calm, and the manager glared at Sam, alarm and menace in his unpleasant eyes.

"I have asserted that this letter," said Locke,

holding up the missive in question, "is a forgery. It is a rather clever imitation of my handwriting, a specimen of which was taken from my desk in my room last Sunday, together with a letter which the pilferer dared not present as evidence at this meeting.

"I have reasons to believe that a party present in this room was guilty of rifling that desk. It happens that I did a slight favor for the younger brother of this lad here, who is a bell boy at the Central, and Sammy's conscience has been troubling him during the past few days, finally leading him into a confession which interested me not a little. Go ahead, Sammy, and tell what you have to tell."

In less than a minute, the icy Mr. Hutchinson, warmed to the melting point, was on his feet denouncing Sammy Bryant as a wicked little fabricator; for the lad had told of being bribed by Hutchinson to slip the pass-key of Locke's room from the office rack and unlock the door while Tom was absent at church, and had averred that, watching, he had seen Hutchinson sneak into the room.

"I'll make you smart for this, you young rascal!" declared Hutch savagely. "You'll lose your job, anyhow."

"Mebbe," returned the boy; "but you'll lose *yourn.*"

"What's this mess got t' do with Hazelton's letter ter me?" demanded Riley, essaying a diversion. "If it was true, which I don't b'lieve at all, 'twouldn't have nothin' t' do with the genuineness of that letter from Paul Hazelton."

"But," said Locke, something almost like pity in his contemptuous smile, "to illustrate what pitiful bunglers you and Hutchinson are, Riley, let me tell you that in making an imitation of my handwriting and attaching the supposed signature of Paul Hazelton, you have mired yourselves in a pit of your own digging. For, as I am not Paul Hazelton, a letter written in imitation of my penmanship and signed with his name *must* be a forgery. It is my turn now to put the work of a photographer in evidence."

CHAPTER XLVI

CLEARED UP

THE youthful stranger handed over a large, square, flat package, and Locke quickly removed the wrapper, displaying a group photograph of a team of youthful baseball players, upon the breasts of whose shirts could be seen the word "Princeton."

"This," said Tom, displaying the picture, "shows the Princeton College nine of this season, with the name of every player printed at the bottom. Here you may see the name of Hazelton, followed by the letter P, and I would like to have you look at it well; look at it, and see if you would call it my picture. Also look over the rest of the faces to see if you can find mine among them."

Shaking with excitement, his eyes bulging with wonder, Henry Cope was standing on his toes to peer at the picture over Locke's shoulder. Anson Graham was looking at it, too; and, with the exception of Hutchinson and King, the others flocked round to get a peep.

"Great sassafras!" spluttered Cope. "I writ

a letter, makin' Paul Hazelton an offer to pitch for Kingsbridge, and *you* come in answer to that letter. You likewise sent me a message—''

''Saying: 'Coming, P. Hazelton,' '' interrupted Locke. ''Of course, it never occurred to you that there might be two Hazeltons. I have never denied that my name is Hazelton, but I have denied repeatedly that it is Paul Hazelton. It is Philip. Four years ago I pitched a few games for the Princeton varsity in my junior year, but was obliged to give it up because of the opposition of my father, a clergyman, who, having had a friend killed in the game, has a perfect horror of it.

''My younger brother, Paul, having caught the fever, has incurred the displeasure of our strait-laced father to the extent of being refused further financial assistance in completing his college career. Paul told me of this, and, at the same time, of a splendid offer he had received to pitch professionally on a bush-league team. He had this year made a record for himself with his college team, but it looked as if he would be forced to play for money in order to pay his way through college.

''One year—spent mainly in waiting for clients —as a lawyer in a small city had not placed me in position to help him, but finally I was struck with

the idea of filling that baseball opening in his place. Belonging to an athletic club, I had kept in good condition, having continued to pitch occasionally after graduating from college. In ten or twelve weeks of summer baseball, at the salary offered, I could earn enough to pay my brother's expenses at Princeton for the coming year.

"If the man who had made the offer were to learn that it was a brother of the famous Princeton pitcher who responded, instead of the pitcher himself, he might be inclined to cut down the amount he had flourished as such an alluring bait, and hence it was decided not to take him into our confidence. Mr. Cope, I humbly crave your pardon."

"Oh, thunder!" exclaimed the delighted grocer. "Don't mention it! Lordy! Lordy! Ain't it funny!"

There were some persons present, however, to whom the humor of the situation made no appeal whatever.

The Kingsbridge pitcher continued:

"As the given name of both my brother and myself begins with P, the mistake of the photographer who handed out one of my pictures when Mr. King's obliging friend called for a photograph of Paul Hazelton is readily under-

stood. In order to settle this controversy for all time, I thought best to wire my brother to come on, and it was to meet him here in Bancroft that I left Kingsbridge this morning. Gentlemen, let me introduce Paul Hazelton."

The youthful stranger who had arrived in company with the bell boy bowed and smiled.

"I'm it," he said. "But, to judge by his record in this league, when it comes to pitching, I'm an 'also ran' compared with Phil."

"It should be plain to you now, Mr. Riley," said Philip Hazelton grimly, "that you made a very bad break when you produced a letter, seemingly in my handwriting, dated at Princeton, and signed with the name of Paul Hazelton. Mr. Hutchinson, also, has blundered in— Oh, by the way where is he? He seems to be missing."

"He's sneaked," cried Sammy Bryant. "He got out when nobody was lookin'."

"He'd better sneak," declared Henry Cope. "I don't blame him a bit for skedaddlin' outer here. He'd better git outer Kingsbridge in a hurry, too."

The following evening found Philip Hazelton meditating over a daintily perfumed note that had been brought him by a boy. A dozen times

he read it; as many times he started up, as if with a purpose, only to falter.

At last, however, he literally tore the blue-serge suit off the hangers in the wardrobe, and lost no time in donning it, save that wasted through the fumbling produced by his almost frantic haste.

"After all," he told himself, rejoicing, "she wasn't to blame. King did it with that photograph. It's no wonder she thought me untruthful. Will I call at eight this evening; will I *please* call at eight? Will I! It's almost half past seven now. I'm afraid I never can wait for eight o'clock."

It was Janet herself who let him in when he rang at the parsonage door.

"Mr. Locke—I mean Hazelton," she said, "I want to offer you a humble apology. It was simply dreadful of me. Can you pardon me?"

He did not leave her long in doubt, and the pleasure of that Sunday meeting in the woods paled in comparison with the delight of the ensuing hour. Henry Cope had improved the first opportunity to tell her all that had taken place at the meeting in Bancroft.

"Oh," she cried, when she thought of it, as they sat close together in the parlor, "I have a surprise for you. I told my father all about it,

and he says he knows your father; that they were chums at college. Isn't that a delightful coincidence. And father wants to meet you, and I think—I'm quite sure—he'll form a better opinion of some baseball players. I'm going to make him let me attend every game here in Kingsbridge. He just can't keep me away, that's all."

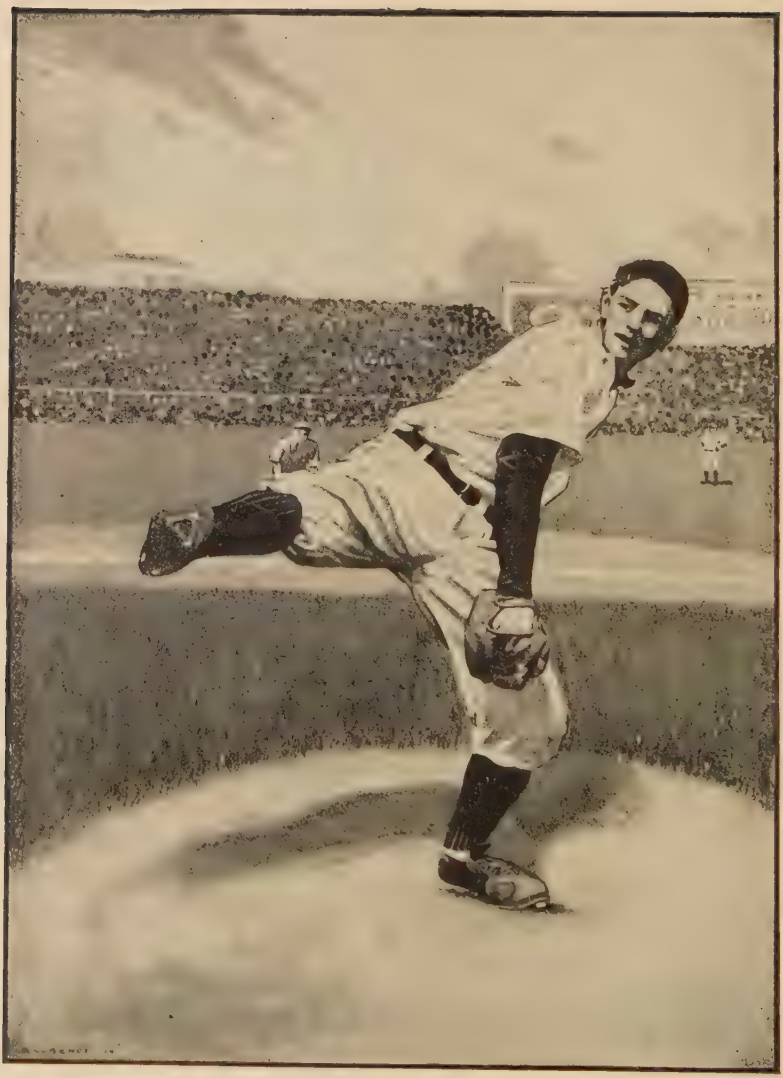
Little did she realize when she spoke that she was destined to witness Lefty's struggles and success as a Major League pitcher afar from Kingsbridge and the "bush" where he had created such a sensation. The story of his first season in fast company is told in the next volume of this series, the title of which is, "Lefty o' the Big League."

In the course of their chat, he mentioned his sister, whom he affectionately called "Tid," but, as she turned away at that moment, he failed to detect the strange look that flashed into Janet's eyes. When he finally left, she accompanied him to the door to let him out. The shaded lamp in the hall was low and dim, and they stood there some moments, close together, speaking in subdued tones, save when—

After he was gone, she lingered by the door, listening to the sound of his footsteps until it died away on the silent street.

THE END

LEFTY O' THE BIG LEAGUE



HE WAS SAYING TO HIMSELF: "ONE MORE! ONLY ONE MORE! I MUST GET HIM—I'VE GOT TO!"

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LEFTY
O' THE BIG LEAGUE

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of "Lefty o' the Bush," "Lefty o' the Blue Stockings," "Lefty o' the Training Camp."

ILLUSTRATED

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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Printed in the United States of America

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LEFTY O' THE BIG LEAGUE

CHAPTER I

GETTING IN BAD

"SAY, fellows!" sang out Red Pollock, the snappy little shortstop of the famous Hornets. "Look who's here!"

There was a general turning of heads and craning of necks on the part of three or four players waiting their chance to wield the willow in batting practice.

"Another Yannigan," groaned Cy Russell, star pitcher of the organization. "The woods is full of 'em."

"He don't look much to me, neither," stated big Buck Fargo critically. "Say, Jim, who is it, an' where'd you root it out?"

Brennan, the short, stocky, belligerent-looking manager of the Big League team, did not answer. With his bushy eyebrows drawn down in a frown over his deep-set eyes, he was staring at the young

fellow threading his way through the groups of players scattered about the field at all kinds of training work. The stranger wore a soiled and faded gray uniform, upon the shirt of which was sewn a letter K, and dangled a worn leather glove by one finger. His cap, pushed back on a mane of heavy, dark-brown hair, revealed a clean-cut, pleasant face, dominated by a pair of keen brown eyes, a firm chin, and sensitive mouth.

As he took in these details Brennan's scowl deepened and his bulldog chin protruded dangerously. Catching sight of his face, Pollock grinned and nudged the man nearest him. "Look at the old man," he whispered. "Something doing."

The stranger came on without a pause, and, a moment or two later, stopped before the manager. His lips were pressed tightly together, but otherwise his face was perfectly composed. "I've come to report, sir," he said quietly.

The manager's eyes narrowed. Several things had been fretting him all morning, and his temper was not even at its uncertain best. "Indeed!" he sneered. "And who are you?"

"Locke—Lefty Locke."

"Never heard the name before," retorted Brennan shortly.

For an instant the newcomer seemed taken aback. A faint touch of color came into his cheeks, and he looked at the manager as if wondering whether he could possibly be in earnest.

"I—thought—Mr. Toler had written you," he stammered. "He—said he was going to."

Brennan's eyes flashed. "Well, he didn't," he snapped. "Where'd you come from? What's your record?"

"I pitched last season with the Kingsbridge team of the Northern League," Locke said briefly.

"A twirler!" exclaimed the manager. "Well, I'll be—" He stopped abruptly, gulped once or twice, and then asked, in an ominously quiet voice: "What did you do season before last?"

"Nothing. It was my first year in professional baseball."

"What!" Brennan's face turned purple, and his last shreds of self-restraint vanished. "You pitched one season, an' got the gall to expect a job with the Hornets! You expect me to believe that Ed Toler, the best scout I've got, picked you up without saying a word to me about it—when we're overrun with pitchers, at that. I don't want you. Training was begun ten days ago, an' I got enough men. You can hike back to the bush, where you come from. I wasn't born yes-

terday, an' you can't put one over me like this. Get that?"

As he listened to the tirade, the color flamed into Locke's face, and his grip on the leather glove tightened. Then, from the group of players, who had been interested spectators of the interview, came a smothered laugh, which seemed to act like a tonic. As he heard it, Locke's eyes narrowed and his face hardened.

"You don't want me?" he repeated, in a steady voice. "You're willing to release me from the contract I made with Toler?"

"That's what I said," growled Brennan.

"Then I'm free to accept any other offer?"

Something in his tone made the manager prick up his ears, all his professional instincts aroused. It is one thing to fire a man who isn't wanted, but quite another to let him go when another club is after him. "Offer!" he sneered, with deliberate intent. "I s'pose the Tigers an' the Blue Stockings are fair tearing each other's eyes out as to which'll have you."

Lefty's lips tightened at the man's tone. "You guessed right, in a way," he retorted. "Twenty-four hours after I pledged with Toler, I had an offer from the Blue Stockings of a thousand dollars more than your scout promised me."

The silence which followed this statement was eloquent. Some one in the little group near by whistled incredulously. Brennan's eyes were fixed intently on the cub pitcher's face, as if he were trying to make out whether this was the truth or a magnificent bluff. Accustomed as he was to judging men, he was forced to admit that the youngster did not look like a liar.

"And how much was that?" he demanded abruptly.

"Twenty-five hundred." Already Lefty was sorry for his impulsive outburst. In a flash he realized that if he had kept his mouth shut he would have been free in a moment to accept the better offer.

"Humph!" grunted Brennan thoughtfully. If Doyle, of the Blue Stockings—the Hornets' most bitter rivals—wanted this kid as bad as that, there must be something in him, and it would never do to let him go. Much as he hated backing water, the manager was too shrewd a man to allow personal feelings to influence his professional judgment. He scowled deeply, bit his lips, and then snapped sourly:

"Well, seeing as you're here, you might as well make yourself useful. Trot out there and take that fellow's place; I can use him somewhere else.

Toss a few straight, easy ones over the plate. Stir your stumps now," he went on, turning fiercely on the astonished group near by. "You boys get busy. We've wasted too much time. We'll stop this general shillalah swinging, and take the field in regular positions. Every one of you run your hits out. You need the exercise."

Without a word, Lefty turned, and made his way toward the cub pitcher, who had been shuffling around near the slab waiting for the altercation to end. He had been extremely foolish not to keep his face shut, but there was nothing to be gained by repining over the past.

An instant later, as his eyes met those of the man he was replacing, he started slightly, and a look of dazed surprise flashed into his face. It vanished swiftly, but as he reached the fellow his lips were compressed, his eyes hard and cold.

"Hello, Elgin," he said stiffly.

The other, his face black as a thunder cloud, growled out an unintelligible monosyllable, thrust the ball into Locke's hand, and walked hurriedly away, leaving the latter to stare after him with an expression which told, as well as spoken words could have done, how unpleasant and distasteful the encounter was to him.

CHAPTER II

A CALL-DOWN FROM THE MANAGER

THE meeting had so surprised and startled Lefty that he stood there for a moment or two, ball in hand, watching Elgin join the manager and start with him toward another part of the field. He was aroused abruptly by a drawling, sarcastic voice from the plate:

"Don't hurry yourself, bub; any time to-day will do."

It was burly Buck Fargo, the prize backstop, who stood leaning indolently on his bat, watching Locke with mocking eyes. Lefty recognized him instantly from the many published pictures he had seen, and, berating himself inwardly for having given the fellow a chance to criticise, he swiftly toed the pitcher's plate and sent the ball over.

Of course, it went wide. The cub catcher let out a stream of sarcastic language as he stretched himself in vain for it. A joyful snicker arose from the waiting players, and Fargo grinned aggravatingly.

"Try again, bub," the latter invited pleasantly. "Jest a mite nearer this time, say a couple of feet. This here stick's only regulation length, and I ain't built like a gorilla."

Lefty bit his lips and made no response. A small boy retrieved the ball, and the irate catcher whipped it out with decidedly unnecessary force. With gritted teeth, Locke caught it, determined that there would be no more exhibitions like that. He did not know what was the matter with him. To be sure, he had done very little pitching for a long time, but he should be able to find the plate better than this.

The second effort was not much of an improvement, and a howl of derision greeted it; for there is nothing a crowd of old baseball men enjoy more than having fun with a green cub.

The sound had a curious effect upon Lefty. Before the echoes of that jeering chorus died away he had regained his grip. He realized that they were doing their best to rattle him and cause him to make an exhibition of himself, and his jaw squared resolutely.

"I'll fool 'em!" he muttered. "I'll show him something."

He caught the ball easily, his eyes fixed on Fargo's grinning face. The big catcher stood

negligently swinging his bat, and when he saw the sphere coming apparently straight toward him with speed, he dodged back precipitously, only to behold it shoot gracefully in and cut a corner of the plate.

"Well, well, well!" he exclaimed. "Accidents will happen. You've really got a curve, have you? Let's have another one like that, if you can do it."

Lefty could and did, and the batter sent the horsehide soaring over the fence. Obedient to instructions, he tossed aside his bat, and began trotting leisurely around the bases. Halfway between first and second he paused for a moment. "You'll learn, bub," he chuckled. "Some time next fall mebbe we'll make a pitcher out of you." Then he resumed his placid way about the diamond, while a new ball was produced, and Locke faced the second batter.

Lefty did not try any more curves, for he had suddenly realized that this was batting practice, not an exhibition of pitching. He continued to find the plate with a fair degree of accuracy, however, and one after another the three other players smashed out the sphere with joyous enthusiasm, forgetting in the delight of batting to continue their baiting of the new pitcher.

Not so Buck Fargo. He enjoyed batting quite as much as his companions, but he also dearly loved to get a cub's goat.

"Where's your curves, bub?" he taunted, as he took up his bat for the second time. "Can't you give us something interesting, or was they accidents, like I thought?"

Lefty smiled faintly. He did not intend to give Fargo the satisfaction of seeing that his words made any impression whatever. In spite of his determination, however, as he flung his arm forward, unconsciously he gave it a little twist which made the horsehide—seemingly wide at first—cut a corner of the plate in an elusive curve. The batter hit it glancingly, and popped up a little fly which Locke smothered without moving more than a step or two from his position.

"Not bad for the bush," chuckled Fargo, quite undisturbed. "Saved me the trouble of stretching my legs, anyhow. Come ahead, Cy, and see what you can do with the boy wonder from Squedunk." He shot a swift glance out of the corner of his eye toward a distant part of the field, and went on in exactly the same tone, with scarcely a perceptible break: "He's got a baby curve or two that might be fair if he could control 'em."

Lefty was possessed by an irresistible impulse

to see what he could do with the mighty pitcher, Cy Russell. He knew perfectly well that the discomfiture of one of their number might get the whole bunch down on him, but he was a very human individual, with a spice of obstinacy in his make-up. Moreover, he had failed to catch that quick glance of Fargo's across the field, and so was quite unsuspecting.

As Russell faced him, Locke deliberately sent over a drop which fooled the batter completely. A slow floater was equally successful, and a swift, straight one, cutting the center of the pan, completed the discomfiture of the notoriously poorest hitter in the organization.

Fargo jeered out something about luck and "goose eggs," and hustled the next man to the plate. Lefty, throwing prudence and common sense to the winds, resolved to give them what they clamored for if it was in his power. He fooled the batter into swinging at a clever bender, and then, oblivious to the sudden cessation of Fargo's taunting voice, was just winding up to pitch again when a hand suddenly gripped his wrist, and a harsh voice sounded in his ear:

"What the deuce do you think you're doing, Locke?"

Brought to earth, Lefty swung around, and

stared for an instant, with mantling cheeks, at Jim Brennan's angry face.

"Gimme that ball!" rasped the manager. Locke handed it over without a word. "I s'pose you think you're mighty smart showin' off your cute tricks," the older man went on, in a cold, biting tone; "but that's where you fall down—hard. This is batting practice, not a Fourth of July celebration. When I want any fireworks I'll let you know. Get that? Well, see you remember it. Another stage play like this will be your finish. All around the park, boys, and then back to dinner."

He turned from Lefty with an abruptness which made it impossible for the cub pitcher to say a word in his own defense, and perhaps it was just as well. To tell the truth, there was nothing to be said. Locke realized perfectly that he was totally in the wrong. A moment later, as he caught a glimpse of Buck Fargo's grinning face, it flashed over him that the whole thing was a put-up job to get him a call. The big catcher could not have failed to see Brennan coming long before the manager got within hearing distance, yet he had kept up his taunts to the last minute in order that Locke might be taken by surprise.

"Looks like my luck had deserted me," Lefty

thought, as he fell into the line of men trotting briskly around the field just inside the high board fence. "Haven't been here an hour before I get a call from the manager and run into Bert Elgin."

At the thought of the latter's presence in the squad, he frowned deeply. The call-down was swiftly forgotten, but this other annoyance was likely to be much more lasting and trouble-breeding in its results.

CHAPTER III

THE RIOT AT THE THEATER

"AH, rah boy, is he?" sneered a voice from the group not far away. "I see his finish."

Lefty knew they were talking about him. He had been aware of the fact for five minutes or so, but this was the first remark which had reached his ears in its entirety. Sitting in a corner of the Hatchford House lobby, he turned his head slightly and met the belligerent glance of a burly, dark-browed, full-lipped fellow of twenty-six or seven, who was lounging against a pillar a little way off.

For a moment their eyes clashed, and then Hagin—Lefty had heard him so called, and recognized the name as that of the left fielder on the regulars—laughed disagreeably and said something to the man next him, who glanced up, stared, and turned away with just the same sort of laugh.

Lefty's eyes dropped to the newspaper he held before him. In the scant nine hours since his appearance on the field that morning, the wide difference between a bush-league team and an organ-

ization like the Hornets had been forced upon him at every turn. In his joy and astonishment at the unexpected offer from Brennan's scout, to say nothing of the better one which followed it so closely, he had given little thought to what his reception would be by the other players.

He was far too sensible, of course, to expect anything like an open-armed welcome, but he had not quite counted on the cold-shouldered indifference which was meted out to him from every quarter.

The other fellows were mostly friendly enough among themselves. On the field, in the hotel dining room, and now in the lobby, they gathered in little groups, laughing, joking, chaffing each other in a way which, in no small degree, emphasized the newcomer's loneliness and isolation.

Lefty had tried several times during the day to scrape acquaintance with some fellow who looked pleasant and friendly enough, for he was a chap who enjoyed the companionship of his fellow men, and exactly the sort of joshing give-and-take which is inevitable when a crowd of like-minded individuals get together. His mild little efforts had been met with such brusque, chilling indifference, however, that he speedily gave it up.

"I seem to have gotten in wrong from the

start," he reflected, as he sat with his eyes fixed on the paper, though he had read scarcely a word. "Brennan's sore as a crab because he had to back water before his own men. I wish to thunder he hadn't! I'd be better off. Then there was that fool exhibition of mine on the field. I suppose they all think I'm swelled up about my pitching, and was showing off. And now they've found out I'm a college man. I wonder how they got wise to that. I didn't mean any one should know, if I could help it; some professionals seem to have such a deep dislike for a fellow who's been through college. I wonder if Elgin could have dropped a hint."

In reality Lefty had quite missed the most important reason of all. Other things may have influenced the men in some small degree, but the simple fact of his belated arrival at the training quarters accounted for more than anything else.

Ten days had been ample for the cubs, or new recruits, to become acquainted. They had formed their little cliques, split up into their different factions. They were sufficient unto themselves. It was natural for them to treat a new arrival with jealous coldness, for every additional candidate only decreased the chances of the others

to make good. As for the old men—the regulars of this especial team—they had small use for a youngster until he showed himself made of the right stuff.

At length, tired of sitting alone, Lefty arose and sallied forth to take a casual inspection of the Texas town. Ashland was a place of some size, and decidedly up to date. A number of factories and various oil refineries gave employment to several thousand workmen, the majority of whom—it seemed to Lefty—were thronging the brightly lighted streets, blocking the corners, or crowding into the many moving-picture or vaudeville shows which lined the main thoroughfares.

Lefty did not find this solitary inspection of the town very exciting, and, after he had traversed a few of the principal streets, he decided that he had had enough. A glance at his watch told him that it was only a quarter to eight. The evening seemed to be dragging along with infinite slowness. He might return to the hotel and go to bed, of course, but he wasn't in the least sleepy, and somehow he had a feeling that by doing such a thing he would be giving in. Finally the glaring lights of a combination moving-picture and vaudeville show across the street gave him an idea.

Crossing hastily, he bought a ticket and pushed into the darkened auditorium.

The place was jammed to the doors with a rather boisterous crowd, made up almost entirely of men. Lefty could see no vacant seat, and so he took his place against the wall back of the last row, from which position he watched the progress of the pictured drama with a certain amount of interest. There was no questioning the unusual excellence of the films.

Two of them were rolled off before the stage lights went up and the curtain lifted upon the Montmorency Sisters, vocalists. Lefty yawned, and decided to get out. The place was hot and stuffy, and he was on the point of crowding past the later arrivals who filled the space near him, when, suddenly catching sight of two men sitting three rows away, he changed his mind.

One of them was a total stranger. Lefty did not remember ever having seen him before. The other was Bert Elgin, and, as his eyes took in the sharp profile, with the familiar, sneering uplift at the corner of the lips, Locke's face darkened. The face had changed little since he had last seen it. An added line or two showed about the mouth, perhaps, and there was, no doubt, a certain maturity which years alone can bring. In all essen-

tial features, however, it was unaltered, and the sight of it brought a rush of vivid recollection into Lefty's mind which made him frown. It seemed the irony of fate that they two should meet again under conditions which must throw them together in most undesirable terms of intimacy.

Oblivious to the twittering pair capering about the stage, Lefty stood staring at the back of Elgin's head with unseeing eyes. His mind was back in the past, and his expression showed how unpleasant the remembrance was.

The burst of handclapping at the end of the act aroused him in time to see Elgin and his companion arise and crowd toward the aisle. He stood there waiting for them to go, for he had no desire to encounter the fellow just now. With narrowing eyes, he watched his old enemy elbow his way roughly toward the door, careless of who or what was in his path.

It all came about so suddenly and unexpectedly that Lefty never knew just what was the real cause. He saw one or two men turn and stare angrily at the fellow shoving his way past them, muttering something under their breath as they did so. Then, just as the pair were opposite him and close to the door, Locke heard a sharp cry of

pain in a woman's voice, followed instantly by a bellow of fury from a man. Swiftly there came the thud of bare fists against flesh and bone. A dozen men sprang up and began shoving toward the door. A woman screamed shrilly.

CHAPTER IV

ONE AGAINST SCORES

INSTINCTIVELY Lefty joined the rush toward the center of disturbance. He caught a glimpse of two men struggling in close embrace, each raining blows upon the other's face and body. He saw that one of them was Bert Elgin. The other was a big, burly fellow, dressed in a workman's Sunday best, his face flushed, his eyes aflame with anger.

A score of other men were trying to get close enough to put in a blow or two. The place resounded with shouts of: "Kill him!" "Lynch him!" "Beat him up!" Then the whole struggling mob burst through the narrow doorway into the garish, glittering lobby.

Lefty was borne irresistibly toward the door by the crowd behind him, which seemed eager to take part in the fracas. By the time he reached it the entire audience was on its feet, making for the single exit. Hands pinioned helplessly at his sides, Locke was forced into the maelstrom of bodies. There was a squeeze, a breathless grunt, and he plunged out into the dazzling brightness.

The disturbance had ceased to be a fight and turned into a riot. The mob was made up of men in the raw, lacking in self-restraint, whose passions were roused to a white heat with very little cause. A woman's cry of pain, the roar of fury from her escort, and the trouble was started.

As they surged against the frail, ornate booth from which tickets were dispensed, they were like a lot of madmen. Not half a dozen out of the crowd knew what the disturbance was about. Blows were rained on the heads and shoulders and backs of friends in their eagerness to get at the man in the very heart of that seething throng, and already two vigorous personal encounters had been started in different corners of the lobby on that account.

As he was flung forward against the side of the ticket booth, Lefty felt sudden anger surge up within him. He forgot that Bert Elgin was his enemy, and remembered only that he was battling against odds. And when, a moment later, by some odd trick of chance, he saw the fellow's face, bruised, battered, blood trickling from a cut on his cheek, and caught a fleeting glance of desperate appeal from Elgin's terror-stricken eyes, he threw caution to the winds and jumped into the fray.

The very size of the mob was in Locke's favor, but it is doubtful whether he could have done much to help Elgin except for the unexpected giving way of the ticket booth. Slowly it began to sway under the tremendous pressure against one side. A door at the back was burst suddenly open, and the ticket agent dashed forth, clutching the cash drawer in both hands, only to trip and fall headlong, scattering money in every direction, and causing a new diversion. The crashing over of the booth was another, and for an instant Elgin was freed from the clutching hands which had held him prisoner.

Lefty darted forward, gripped the man by the shoulders, and dragged him into the angle made by the wrecked booth and one wall of the lobby. Petrified by fear, the fellow sank helplessly to the floor, and Locke had barely time to leap in front of him before the yelling crowd surged forward again.

In the second that he stood there waiting, the cub pitcher was conscious of a curious feeling which had come to him once or twice before at moments of great tension on the diamond. It was as if his brain had been wiped with a cold, wet sponge, clarifying his vision, and soothing his raw nerves to an almost uncanny degree.

He felt that there could be but one end to the encounter, and yet he was not afraid. He eyed the semicircle of angry faces calmly, coolly, appraisingly, mentally picking out the exact spot on the protruding jaw of the foremost man with which he meant to make connections an instant later. When the fellow went down before his beautiful swinging blow, Lefty felt a thrill of successful accomplishment.

A second man swiftly followed the first, but after that there was no time for picking and choosing. With a howl of rage, the crowd rushed forward in a body, bent on getting their hands on their prey and crushing him bodily. Luckily only three men could face Locke at once, and for a brief space he held them back by sheer skill and trained muscles.

With fine precision he wasted not a single effort, but broke through clumsy guarding arms, to land on some vital spot with a jolt which sent his man reeling back against the others, or else crumpled him to the floor.

In about three minutes those in the front rank were seeking to escape the deadly accuracy of his blows by dodging to one side or trying to push back through the crowd. Unfortunately for Locke, those in the rear continued to force their

way forward, and thus slowly but inexorably the ring closed in.

Lefty's arms moved faster and faster. He had long ago ceased to pick and choose—it was impossible. Several times he had leaped back before it occurred to him to wonder what had become of Elgin. That was but a fleeting thought, however. He had never counted on the fellow's aid, so it was just as well that he was not in the way.

A number of glancing blows had struck home, one cutting his lips. At last he began to wonder how long he could keep it up, and what the end would be. He knew he might expect no mercy from the maddened crowd, all of whom supposed, by this time, that he was the one who had started the fracas. Unless the police came soon, or some other help—

Suddenly he felt a movement behind him. His first thought was that his enemies had found a way to get him at the rear; but even before he could whirl about to face them, two hands caught his shoulders, and a familiar voice sounded in his ear:

"Lemme have a whack at 'em, kid."

It was Buck Fargo, the big catcher of the Hornets.

CHAPTER V

FRIENDLY BUCK FARGO

DAZED, bewildered, a sudden overpowering weakness gripping his limbs, Lefty felt himself thrust against the wall, and saw the massive form of the man who had baited him so successfully on the field that morning leap into the front place, eyes blazing and huge fists doubled for action.

Perhaps it was the sight of him—burly, menacing, and fresh—which turned the tide. More likely it was that sudden panicky awakening which comes to every mob when the first outburst of passion has run its course. At all events, Fargo had no more than time to land his fist with precision and force on the faces of two men, before some one at the rear started a yell that the cops were coming.

The effect was magical. Out into the street poured the mob, and fled wildly in every direction. Before he realized that it was all over Lefty felt himself grasped by the shoulders, hustled out of the barricade and rushed across the street. The

whole thoroughfare was filled with flying men, so that they passed unnoticed as Fargo headed straight for the nearest corner.

"Them cops is coming at last," he explained shortly, whirling into a side street. "We don't want to be pinched. Think you're good for the hotel, kid? If you ain't, we can stop at a drug store and have you patched up."

"I can make it all right," Lefty gasped. "I'm only—dead beat." An instant later he stopped still. "What became of Elgin?" he asked abruptly. "I forgot him."

"He beat it." Fargo's tone was noncommittal. "He crawled out the same way I got in, while they was busy with you. That ticket coop was held up a mite at the end by hitting against the wall. He's all safe."

There was an expression of curiosity on the catcher's face, and for a moment he seemed about to ask a question. Apparently he changed his mind, however, for the next instant his lips closed and he hustled Lefty on again.

They reached the hotel without attracting much attention. Locke had managed to wipe most of the stains of battle from his face, and as they entered the side door Fargo clapped his own wide-brimmed felt hat on the other's head, starting some

rough bantering with the elevator boy, which kept the fellow occupied. They stepped out on the top floor without the boy having really noticed Lefty at all.

"Now we'll take stock, kid," the catcher said, as he switched on the lights in Lefty's room and closed the door. "That face of yours ain't so bad, after all. We'll fix your mouth up in a jiffy. Got any plaster?"

Locke nodded. "Yes, but I don't want you to bother about it, Fargo. It's white of you to—"

"Stow that, son!" interrupted the big chap shortly. "This rumpus is going to get the old man up on his ear for fair. If he finds out you was in it, there'll be blazes to pay."

"But how can he help it? I was there, and everybody saw me."

"Sure you was," grinned Fargo, dexterously applying a wet towel to Locke's countenance. "In the scuffle you got a tap or two by mistake; that's all. You don't s'pose that crazy bunch of roughnecks is going to remember faces, do you? They was clean off their nuts, every last one of 'em."

There was silence for a moment or two as the big, muscular fingers applied the plaster to the cut lips with surprising deftness. "There!"

Fargo said with satisfaction. "That'll do fine. There's a scratch alongside your nose, but it don't amount to nothing. Pull off your shirt, and let's have a look at the rest of you."

Lefty obeyed without question, and revealed a muscular chest dotted here and there with bruises already beginning to darken. It had been impossible to guard himself at every point from the frenzied rushes, and he had instinctively protected his face.

Fargo grinned as he saw the damage. "Won't you be stiff and sore to-morrow morning!" he chuckled. "It's lucky you can lay it to the first day's practice. Say, kid, how in thunder did you two start that riot? You look like a peaceble guy to me."

"I didn't start it," Lefty returned swiftly. "I broke into the game afterward."

"Humph! Let's hear about it."

Briefly, Lefty told him what little he knew about the beginning of the trouble. He said nothing of his dislike for Bert Elgin, but Fargo must have guessed it from his manner.

"So that's it?" the catcher commented. "I gather you two ain't very chummy."

"Not exactly," Lefty returned shortly.

Fargo eyed him curiously. "Then why did you

butt in? He started the muss, and I should say he deserved what he got."

"But the whole push was against him," protested Locke. "I couldn't sneak off and let them hammer him to pieces."

"Strikes me that *he* sneaked," Fargo said swiftly. "When I came across the street to see what was doing, there wasn't any use trying to get near the front, so I made for the corner to see if I could get a glimpse over the top of that tipped-over ticket cage. I hadn't been there a minute before Elgin came crawling out from underneath. He was so blamed scared that I hadn't more'n got out of him that you were in there alone when he beat it. Looks like it didn't worry him any to leave you alone for the bunch to hammer."

Lefty smiled faintly. "Can't help that. It was up to him. I'd have hated myself if I'd gone away and left any man in that kind of a hole." He hesitated an instant, the color rising to his face. "Besides, even if we aren't friends, he's —one of the bunch."

Fargo stared at him oddly; then he broke into a laugh. "Time we was both in bed," he said abruptly. "Don't forget to keep your trap shut about this to-morrow. You was there and got a

love tap or two in the scuffle. Lucky the old man can't see that chest of yours."

Outside the door he paused, the queer look in his eyes again. "One of the bunch!" he muttered aloud. "Well, I'll be hanged!"

CHAPTER VI

WHO WAS TO BLAME?

ON his way in to breakfast next morning, Manager Brennan bought a copy of the Ashland *Morning Chronicle* to glance through during the progress of the meal. Having seated himself and given his order, he spread open the sheet. The first thing to catch his eye was the flaming headline, "Palace Theater Wrecked by Mob."

Having heard echoes of the affair the night before, the manager glanced over the account with interest. Halfway down the column he stopped short, clutched the paper, and stared with bulging eyes and purpling cheeks at a certain short paragraph:

> The cause of the riot is not definitely known. It is said, however, to have been started by the rowdyish behavior of one of the visiting baseball men who was attending the performance. We might call Manager Brennan's attention to the fact that, while Ashland is always ready to extend every hospitality to himself and his famous organization, she does not care about having that hospitality abused.

With a guttural exclamation of rage, Brennan

half started from his seat, only to relax again and glare around.

"You read that stuff?" he demanded, catching the eye of Red Pollock across the table.

"Sure!" grinned the latter. "Great dope. If Cy hadn't coaxed me into a game of draw, I'd been there myself, instead of missing all the fun."

"You'd ought to thank me," said Russell philosophically. "If you hadn't been so busy losing your dough to Pete and me, you'd likely got your block knocked off down the street. According to accounts, there wasn't nothing playful about that mix-up."

"I reckon not," sighed Pollock regretfully. "They say the lad that started the rumpus, whoever he was, got into a corner and held off the whole bunch for ten minutes. He must be some scrapper. I got mixed up in a strike riot in Chicago once, and, believe me, it's no cinch to stand off a crowd of roughnecks like that."

"Humph!" grunted the manager. He had cooled down considerably while the others were speaking, and was doing some thinking. "Any of the boys see it?"

"Sure! Buck got a look-in, he was telling us."

Brennan glanced swiftly down to where Fargo sat at the end of the table. "How about last

night, Buck?" he called, in a deceptively mild tone. "Were you the one who started the rough-house downtown?"

"Nix on that!" grinned the catcher. "It was going full blast when I got there. I seen all I wanted to from the outskirts. The crowd was plumb crazy. About a hundred of 'em trying to get at one poor bloke penned in behind the upset ticket booth. Them that couldn't get a whack at him hit somebody else for luck, and a dozen nice little individual scraps were going on all over the place."

"But who was the man?" Brennan persisted. "Didn't you see him?"

"Couldn't get a sight of him from the street," Fargo answered readily. "The ticket booth was too high. I run into one of your cubs—Locke's his name—trying to get out of the crowd, and we came home together."

The manager frowned suspiciously. He knew Fargo of old, and realized that he was just the sort of man to be concerned in an affair of this description. The catcher's gaze was candid and open, however, and the closest scrutiny failed to disclose as much as a scratch on his face.

Brennan's gaze veered swiftly to the next table, where his new recruit sat with some of the other

youngsters. Locke looked cool and undisturbed as he ate his breakfast with evident relish. The manager's keen eye discovered a bit of plaster on one lip and a scratch on one side of his nose; but, by what Fargo had said about the general nature of the fighting, those slight abrasions might easily be accounted for. Besides, Locke did not strike him as having much of the rowdy in his make-up.

Without further comment, Brennan fell to on his breakfast and resumed reading the newspaper account. When he had finished it, he came to the conclusion that if one of his men had indeed been the cause of the disturbance the fellow must be a scrapper of unusual ability, and would surely bear upon his person unmistakable marks of the conflict.

Being a man of action, he at once started the round of his players. He had no desire to antagonize the rougher element in Ashland. He knew perfectly well that this would mean a constant succession of bickerings, with the possibility of injury to some of his highclass players if they got into a fight.

His critical inspection of the men showed the regulars to be beyond reproach. Not one had even a slight abrasion for which he could not

account. The majority were provided with plausible alibis. Of the cubs, three were on the suspicious list. Locke he had already eliminated, and so did not bother about him. The other two were Bert Elgin and a young fielder named Ross, both of whom—and particularly the first mentioned—bore telltale signs on their faces.

They told a plausible, well-balanced story: They had been sitting near the stage of the Palace Theater when the uproar started back by the door. They arose with the rest of the audience and were carried out by the rush of the crowd. When they finally emerged into the lobby—Elgin swore that he had left a good-sized piece of skin from his face on the edge of the door—the place was filled with men, yelling and fighting like maniacs. They were so busy forcing their way to the street that neither had been able to get a look at the cause of the disturbance. Both were hit several times in the face, and had naturally smashed back. On reaching the sidewalk, they had left the place at once and returned to the hotel.

Brennan was slightly nonplused. The story rang true. It agreed perfectly, moreover, with Fargo's account of the affair, and the manager knew that his catcher was not at all on friendly terms with either Elgin or Ross. Lastly, he was

confident that neither of them had pugilistic skill or nerve enough to stand up before such a crowd after the manner which every account agreed that the unknown had done.

Puzzled, with a vague feeling that there was something about it which he did not understand, Brennan was obliged to content himself with a strict order that the entire squad forego shows of any description in the future, under penalty of heavy fines.

Later in the day he instituted inquiries throughout the town, with equal lack of success. The majority of people who had been at the theater had lost their heads, and could tell him nothing that he wanted to know. Three men there were who swore that they had obtained a good look at the mysterious individual, but their descriptions were so totally at variance that the manager gave up his quest in disgust.

"A lot of dough-heads!" he growled. "Sounds as if they were each describing a different person."

Which happened to be exactly the truth.

CHAPTER VII

WITHOUT GRATITUDE

"WELL, it worked all right, kid," remarked Buck Fargo as he caught up with Lefty on the way out to the field. "I'll guarantee the old man didn't even ask you a question, did he?"

"No. I was waiting for him to brace me, but it never came off. What the deuce did you tell him?"

Fargo grinned. "The truth—only not quite all of it," he chuckled. "Wonder how our friend Elgin's going to get out of it?"

Lefty hazarded no guess. He had more than a suspicion that his old acquaintance would manage to evade the responsibility somehow. That had always been his strong point, for he was not overburdened with scruples about sticking to the letter of the truth.

Fargo explained briefly what he had told Brennan, and then dropped back to his own crowd, leaving Locke alone. The latter was just turning into the gate of the field when some one touched

his arm, and, turning, he saw Bert Elgin beside him, a frown of anxiety on his thin face.

"Look here," the man began abruptly, "Brennan's just put it up to me about last night, and I had to give him a song and dance to steer him off. He's mad as a hornet, and I couldn't very well tell him I was mixed up in that fool business. I wanted to put you wise, so if he asks you, your story can fit in with mine."

Locke's eyes were fixed coldly upon the other's face. "And what was the story you told him?" he asked shortly.

"Said I was down in front with Ross, and got these scratches getting out of the place. Didn't know anything about what started the muss, or see the fellow who—"

"And you expect me to back you up in this lie?" Lefty broke in, his eyes narrowing. "You've got another guess coming, Elgin. I came mighty close to lying for you once, and it's the last time."

Elgin's face darkened. "You'll blab it all to him, then?" he burst out. "I might have known you wouldn't let slip a chance like this to get back at me. You always were a—" He stopped abruptly and bit his lip, a slow flush rising in his face.

Lefty's eyes flashed ominously. "Well?" he

snapped. "Let's have it. What were you going to say?"

Elgin's gaze dropped to the ground, and he kicked a pebble awkwardly. "Nothing," he mumbled. "I—wasn't thinking—of what—you did for me last night."

Lefty's lips curled scornfully. "Don't let that worry you," he retorted. "I didn't do it for you. I did it to save my self-respect, and because you were one of the boys against a crowd of muckers. You don't owe me anything. Get that? I don't want you indebted to me. As for this story you told Brennan, it's up to you. I won't go out of my way to put him right, but if he asks me questions I'll tell him the truth."

Elgin threw back his head, furious under the lashing contempt of the other's voice.

"If you're such a good little boy," he sneered, "how do you explain traveling under a name which isn't yours? Strikes me that's a lie, all right."

"That's my business," returned Lefty curtly. "Anything more?"

"No," snarled Elgin; "but if Brennan gets wise through you, I'll settle your hash for good and all."

Lefty shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"Try it," he laughed. "If you don't have any better luck than you did the last time, I guess I'll survive."

Without waiting for a reply, he turned and walked across the field, leaving Elgin glaring after him in speechless rage.

For a moment or two Lefty was conscious of an unpleasant feeling, more like a bad taste in the mouth than anything else. He had not really expected any fulsome expressions of gratitude from Bert Elgin. He was quite sincere in not wishing the man to feel indebted to him in the slightest. And yet, inconsequentially enough, when it was all over he could not help wondering how any one could be so lacking in a sense of decency. At least the fellow could have kept his mouth shut, if nothing else.

The whole matter was swept swiftly out of his mind, however. Brennan, still somewhat peevish at his lack of success in reaching the bottom of the riot affair, was decidedly short of temper, and he started the day's practice with a rush and vim which kept everybody on the jump.

"Get a hustle on you, Locke!" he snapped, as Lefty approached at a dogtrot. "I want to see what some of the cubs can do with a stick," he went on, in a lower tone. "Get out there and

loosen up a bit; a little smoke, you know. You was full enough of it yesterday."

Lefty caught the ball with outward calm, but as he turned and walked out to the pitcher's box he groaned to himself. He had been hoping that he might be spared this to-day, for he had a bruise on his left shoulder as big as a silver dollar, and his whole upper body was stiff and sore from last night's experience.

There was nothing to do but grin and bear it, however, unless he wanted to rouse Brennan's suspicions. While the cub batters were being gathered in, he tried warming up a little, but had no more than sent two balls over before he was brought up sharply by the manager's roar:

"Stop that, and get down to business!"

The first delivery went so high that the cub backstop had difficulty in pulling it down. The second was equally erratic. Lefty flashed a swift glance at the stocky manager, whose face was set in a fierce scowl, and decided that he would have to take a brace at any cost.

With an effort which sent a stinging twinge of pain through his bruised shoulder, he whipped over a speedy straight one, which the batter missed, following it by a drop that was quite as deceptive. Brennan's scowl relaxed slightly, but

more than once during the succeeding twenty minutes it deepened again; for Lefty managed to intersperse wild pitches with good ones in a manner which could not help being exasperating to one who knew nothing of the cause.

"That'll do!" growled the manager, at length. "You're a winner, you are! What's the matter with you to-day?"

Lefty mumbled some excuse about not feeling very fit, and Brennan's lips curled. "Huh!" he snorted. "Delicate, are you? Rot! Hey, Cy, come over and give this cub a few lessons in first principles."

There was a general grin from the watching group of cubs, and Lefty felt his cheeks burn. He recovered himself swiftly, however, and, at Brennan's order, took his place with the batters. The fact that he smashed out a clean single the first time he was up before the Hornet's star pitcher went far toward restoring his own self-respect, even though it had no visible effect on the Argus-eyed manager.

Once during the course of the morning's work Lefty caught Buck Fargo's eyes fixed upon him, and as he was leaving the park toward noon the big backstop stepped out from the group of regulars and came over to him.

"Looks like you were getting in bad with the old man," he remarked seriously. "First impressions go a long distance with him. I've been thinking mebbe we made a mistake in keeping quiet about last night. He'd roar for a bit, but he couldn't sling it into you like he would if you'd started that rough-house."

"You think it would be a good idea to tell him?" Lefty asked gravely.

"That would put him wise to what was the matter with you."

The cub pitcher's lips twitched. "Don't you think it would be more sport to see if he could find it out by himself?" he suggested.

Fargo let out a guffaw and brought one fist down on Locke's shoulder with a force which made him wince.

"For a cub, you ain't half bad, kid," he chuckled.

That was all he said. The next instant he had turned away and rejoined his companions, leaving Lefty to jog on back to the hotel alone.

But somehow, though he was alone, the cub was far from feeling that depressing isolation of the day before. The morning seemed to have been spent principally in stirring up an old enmity and getting in bad with the manager. But these things

did not worry the bush pitcher as they might have done if he had not fancied that he had also made a friend, and one who was well worth while.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAN WHO KNEW

LEFTY had barely stepped inside the Hatchford Hotel lobby when some one leaped at him like a human whirlwind, and a vaguely familiar voice chortled in his ear:

"Well, you old lobster! If I'm not glad to see your ugly mug again! Put it there, old fellow!"

Whirling swiftly, Locke saw standing before him a short, slim, wiry chap of about his own age, with a deeply tanned and freckled face, and a big mouth stretched to its utmost in a wide grin of delight.

"Jack Stillman!" he exclaimed joyously, grabbing the outstretched hand. "Well, what do you know about this! Last time I ran into you was on Broadway, over a year ago. What the mischief are you doing down here?"

"That's easy. I'm the only original live wire on the sporting page of the *Star*. Ran down to look over Jim Brennan's live stock and give the fans something to think about. You don't mean to say you're one of 'em, Phil?"

"Guessed right the first crack, Jack," Lefty

laughed. "You always were an awful clever boy."

"But how the deuce— I didn't even know you'd taken up baseball. Thought you were scratching away in a lawyer's office."

"So I was until last spring. I played the season under the name of Lefty Locke. It's a long story, but—"

Stillman's eyes widened. "You're Locke?" he exclaimed interestedly. "Wouldn't that get you? I heard a few things about his pitching out in the bush last summer, but I hadn't any idea you were it. Let's have the yarn. Any good copy in it?"

"I hope not," Lefty said hastily. "Come on upstairs and I'll tell you the story of my life while I'm making myself respectable."

The newspaper man accepted with alacrity, and when they reached Lefty's room he made himself comfortable while the latter proceeded with his toilet and the recital of the summer's doings at the same time.

"It's a shame that Blue Stocking scout showed up just too late," Stillman said regretfully. "Of course Jimmy Brennan is all right. He's got more baseball under that dome of his than most managers in the country, and if you get in right

you'll be all to the merry. I'd hate like thunder to lose that coin though. Any more cub twirlers in the outfit?"

"Bert Elgin," Lefty returned quietly.

Stillman stared, and an expression of incredulity flashed into his face. "What?" he gasped. "Not—"

Locke nodded. "The same. Funny, isn't it, we should run up against each other this way?"

"Funny? I don't see it. The cur!"

Lefty turned swiftly from the bureau, a queer look on his face. "Just what do you mean by that, Jack?" he asked slowly.

Stillman snorted. "You know very well what I mean," he retorted forcibly. "I'm not supposed to be wise, but Bob Ferris told me the whole story, and it's my opinion you were blamed fools to keep still about it. Any man who'll steal from one college mate and then deliberately work to throw the blame on another isn't fit for decent fellows to associate with. When you had him where you wanted him, why didn't you come out with it, and let everybody know what kind of a mucker he was?"

Lefty slipped into his coat, and dropped down beside his friend.

"You know why we didn't," he said quickly.

"He'd have been fired, and the varsity would have lost about every other game that season. You don't suppose it was on Elgin's account we kept still after we'd found how he was trying to throw the blame on me?"

"I'm not quite a fool. All the same, you were wrong. We might have dropped a game or two, but you could have jumped into his place, all right."

"You know I couldn't. I was slaving about ten hours a day to make up work I missed on account of that beastly typhoid. How long would I have lasted at Princeton if I tried to play ball, too? No; Bob and I thrashed it all out, and, though it came mighty hard, we decided it was the only thing to do, unless we wanted the team beaten to a frazzle."

"Why didn't you come out with it the next year?" demanded Stillman. "You could have pitched then, all right."

"That would have looked fine, wouldn't it? How would we have accounted for keeping quiet so long? I will say, Jack, that we were both sorry more than once afterward; but, having started out, there was nothing else to do but keep on. I don't see how Bob came to tell you. It was understood that we should keep it entirely to ourselves."

"It wasn't till a year after we'd graduated," the reporter explained, his face still clouded. "It was one night at the Princeton Club. I don't remember just how the subject came up. I suppose he thought there wasn't any need of keeping still any longer." He paused and glanced at his companion. "How's he acted since you showed up? Same old Elgin, I suppose?"

For an instant Lefty hesitated. He could picture Stillman's sarcastic reception of the story of the night before, and, knowing his friend's impulsive, quick-tempered nature, he decided that it would be wisest to keep silent.

"He wasn't overjoyed to see me," he returned quietly.

The newspaper man arose. "I should say not!" he commented briefly. "Afraid you'll let the other fellows know what sort of a rotter he is. If I were in your place, I'd be hanged if I wouldn't."

"Where would be the sense?" Lefty retorted. "It was all over and done with years ago. Of course, if he should try anything like the same game again, it would be different. You're not thinking of—"

"It's none of my business," Stillman put in.

"I don't want to have anything to do with the mucker. Let's go down to dinner."

As luck would have it, stepping out of the elevator, they came face to face with Bert Elgin himself, talking earnestly with big Bill Hagin, a regular outfielder. For an instant the former stared blankly at Stillman. Then, with a great affectation of heartiness, he thrust out a hand.

"Well, I'll be hanged if it isn't Jack Stillman!" he exclaimed. "Glad to see you, old hoss!"

The reporter made no attempt to withdraw his hands from his pockets. He seemed, in fact, to thrust them deeper, and as his eyes met Elgin's there was a look of withering, contemptuous scorn in them, which cut the ball player like a knife.

"How are you, Elgin?" he said curtly, and passed on toward the dining room with Lefty.

For a second Elgin stood staring after them, his face flushed and his eyes gleaming angrily.

"Your friend don't seem choked with joy at seeing you," Hagin commented maliciously.

Elgin came to himself with a slight start, and shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "No special friend of mine," he said shortly. "Used to see him now and then three years ago."

Nevertheless, when he dropped into his place at

the table a short time later, his face was still flushed and angry.

"Stillman was friendly enough at Princeton," he thought furiously. "That dog has turned him against me with his lying stories, that's what's happened." He ground his teeth viciously. "If I don't put it all over him, good and proper, I'm a liar!"

CHAPTER IX

SOMETHING SUB-ROSA

"FIVE-INNING practice game at eight-thirty sharp," announced Manager Brennan, at the close of the day's work.

Instantly every tongue stopped wagging, and each man turned an eager, inquiring face in his direction. After nearly two weeks of monotonous training, the prospect of a real game, even if it was only among themselves, was very welcome.

The new recruits, especially, quivered with anticipation. It was a foregone conclusion that the game would be played between the regulars and the "Yannigans," as the cubs are sometimes termed; and the chance of pitting themselves against their more experienced rivals thrilled each one of the youngsters through and through.

The older men were more indifferent. They had played many such games in past training seasons, and knew that these were organized by the manager mainly for the purpose of watching the cubs in action and studying their possibilities. Still, there would be a chance to try their hitting

skill against the bush pitchers, and any ball player will willingly go without a meal in order to bat.

"You can try your hand at being field captain to-morrow, Cy," Brennan said, glancing at Russell, "and make up your own team." He pulled a pencil and rumpled piece of paper from his pocket and turned his attention to the expectant youngsters. "We'll see how you make out bossing a team, Ogan," he went on, as his eyes lighted on the promising young first baseman from Ohio. "I'll want these men to start in playing. Afterward you'll use your own judgment about keeping them in the game."

He began calling out the names of nine cubs, with the positions they were to take, jotting them down as he did so. When he finished with the words, "Whalen, catcher, and Locke on the slab," Lefty beamed.

He had worked hard for two days to atone for the bad impression he had made at first, and this looked as if he had succeeded. "And I'll do even better to-morrow," he resolved, tossing up his glove in sheer exuberance of spirits. "I'll try to show him Toler wasn't such a bad judge of pitchers, after all."

A glimpse of Bert Elgin's scowling face only

added to Lefty's good spirits, and he departed from the field feeling very cheerful indeed.

At the supper table Jim Brennan was conspicuous by his absence, and curious inquiries revealed the fact that he had taken a late afternoon train to Fort Worth, from which he did not expect to return until early morning. "Pop" Jennings, the oldest and most settled pitcher in the organization, was the source of this information. He added that he had been left in charge of the squad, and hoped he would not have to break too many heads to keep order.

The announcement caused no immediate effect beyond a certain noticeable relaxation. There were a few more or less joshing remarks concerning Pop's new job, but they were comparatively mild. Before entering the field of professional baseball Jennings had dallied with the four-ounce gloves to an extent which gave him something of a reputation in sporting circles on the Pacific coast. He was noted for a dogged determination to carry out orders at any cost—a trait which made him invaluable at the crucial moment of a hard-fought game. The players had learned from experience that there would be no slurring of Brennan's instructions, and that any laxity of training would bring with it swift retribution.

Happily, Pop had a praiseworthy habit of retiring promptly at nine o'clock. Jesters said it was because he was getting old and had to be careful of himself. The truth was that Jennings, raised on a farm, had been imbued from earliest years with the value of the old adage, "Early to bed, early to rise," and couldn't help himself.

During the early part of the evening the behavior of the Hornets was unexceptionable. Some lounged in the lobby, reading papers, or chatting lazily. Most of the cubs were gathered in a corner, discussing the morrow's game, and perfecting a system of signals for use on the field. Quite a number of the regulars, gathered about the pool tables, indulged in an innocent game of penny ante, or shot craps. A few drifted off early to their rooms. Pop, making a round of inspection a little before nine, decided that all were harmlessly employed, and departed to bed.

Instantly the click of cues and balls ceased, card games languished, and a state of general restiveness ensued. Lefty and two or three companions, who had drifted in a few minutes before from the lobby, wondered what was going to happen. They were not kept waiting long. At the end of fifteen minutes Bill Hagin sprang to his feet.

"He's safe," he announced. "Come on up to

my room, fellows. It's the whole length of the house from his, and we can have a little racket without his getting wise."

The response was instantaneous, for the Hornets, as a crowd, were nothing if not lively. Every regular in the room arose promptly and started toward the door. The three or four cubs present followed more slowly. They had been long enough with the organization to learn the wisdom of not being too pushing.

Hagin, glancing back from the doorway, sensed the situation, and grinned. "Everybody come along," he invited good-humoredly. "We'll teach you kids the first principles of draw poker."

His remark was general, but his eyes happened to rest lightly on the face of Lefty Locke in a manner which was distinctly challenging. Now, Locke was a very normal young chap, and the tone of condescension rasped him slightly. He fancied he played pretty good poker, and had an idea that even the famous Hornets couldn't show him a whole lot about the game. Consequently he accepted the invitation with alacrity, and was presently seated at a table in the big double room which Hagin shared with one of the other members of the team.

Buck Fargo was on one side of him and Pol-

lock, the red-headed shortstop, on the other. Cigars were produced and lighted, cards appeared, and presently, amid the babble of talk and laughter, Hagin's voice sounded:

"What'll you have to drink, fellows? Speak up sharp, now; the boy's waiting."

As he cut for deal Lefty glanced up and saw one of the hotel bell boys standing near the door, order-blank in hand. From the character and number of the drinks he put down, it became swiftly evident that the crowd was certainly making the most of Jim Brennan's absence. Calls for high-balls, fizzes, gin-rickeys, whisky straights, beers, and ales came from every side. If there were any scattering orders for soft drinks, Lefty did not hear them. The Hornets seemed to agree with Red Pollock that "them soft slops was the worst things a man could put into his stummick."

When his turn came to order, Locke hesitated an instant. With the examples set him on every side by men so much more experienced in the game, he need scarcely feel any compunction in taking something he was used to in moderation A single glass could scarcely do him any harm.

"Light beer," he said, at length.

Glancing hurriedly over his cards, he quite

missed the odd side glance which Buck Fargo flashed at him. But perhaps it was not meant for him to see.

CHAPTER X

"WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY"

THE liquid refreshments arrived while they were in the midst of an unusually animated hand. Everybody had dropped out but Cy Russell, Siegrist, the first baseman, and Lefty. The latter, with three kings and a pair of tens, was half conscious that Fargo had taken a glass from the tray and set it down beside him. It was one of those cases, however, where one gets an impression without really seeing, and he could not have told afterward whether it was actually the big backstop who put it down, or the waiter. And when it came to that, he did not notice whether it was the hotel employee himself who held the tray, or some one else.

He played his hand for all there was in it, and won the good-sized jackpot. Siegrist groaned as he flung down three queens and a pair of eights.

Russell shoved over the chips with a grimace. "I was trying to get by with two pair, aces up. You don't work that innocent-appearing face on me again, kid."

Lefty chuckled and took a long drink from the glass as he shuffled the cards to deal. The beer had an unusual flavor, and he sipped it again, trying to make out what was the matter with it. "Bum stuff," he reflected. "Tastes sort of queer."

As the game progressed, however, he gradually drained the glass without thinking much about it. He was having unusual luck, and played his cards with a skill which put him away in the lead of the others.

Presently Hagin sauntered up to the table. "What'll you have, boys?" he asked. "Time for a second round."

Most of them ordered; one or two declined, among them Lefty.

"No, thanks," Locke said firmly, when Hagin pressed him. "I've had enough."

"I reckon you *have* had enough," put in Buck Fargo, in a tone which seemed so significant that the cub pitcher glanced swiftly at him. The big backstop was busy with his cards, and did not look up; but Lefty noticed that his face was oddly serious. He noticed also the half-emptied glass of seltzer standing beside Fargo's scanty pile of chips, and a sudden qualm struck him.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have taken that beer,

after all," he said to himself. "I thought everybody was drinking something in that line."

A quick survey of the table told him that everybody else was, and, somewhat reassured, he went on with the game. Perhaps the catcher was a little peevish because he was losing so heavily. Adversity at cards brings out the good and bad points of a man's character better than almost anything else.

The game progressed. More drinks were brought, more cigars produced and lighted. No one got befuddled, for the Hornets were a hard-headed crowd, and each one knew his limit; but there was a general warming up throughout the room. Joshing and laughter sounded continuously. Now and then some one would burst into song, only to be sat upon instantly by three or four others. The tobacco smoke hung in a thick pall midway between ceiling and floor, stirred fitfully by soft breezes from the open windows.

For a time Lefty continued to win. Then gradually luck seemed to turn against him. He still held much the same run of cards, but several times he made bad errors in judgment. Presently he became conscious of an extraordinary sensation of lightness in his head, like nothing else he had ever experienced. It was not especially disagree-

able. On the contrary, it seemed as if his senses had become suddenly more acute, as if he could play two small pairs so cleverly that he would bluff out stronger hands. Instead, he lost, and kept on losing.

It was most puzzling and annoying. He could not understand it. That first odd exhilaration passed in a little while, and was succeeded by a dull depression. His head began to ache. Was it the smoke? he wondered. Several times he caught one of the fellows eyeing him curiously, and it brought him up with a jerk, determined to stick it out and let no one know there was anything the matter with him.

How long it continued he never knew. For seeming hours he went on his raw nerve, playing the cards dealt to him instinctively, his whole being occupied in fighting off a clogging sensation which constantly threatened his brain like a smothering blanket.

It was Buck Fargo who made the first move to break up, and Lefty could have hugged him had he not been so taken up in keeping a grip upon his consciousness.

"Well, fellows, I'm going to hit the downy," the big backstop announced, with a cavernous yawn. "Let's settle up."

There were protests, of course; but Fargo was firm.

Released from the tension of playing, Lefty sat stupidly staring at the three red chips in front of him. He was aroused by Russell's voice: "Come across with seventeen bucks, Locke. You made a bad finish."

Without a word, the cub pitcher fumbled in his pocket and drew forth a roll of bills. The numbers in the corners were blurred and indistinct. He picked out several at random, tossed them on the table, gathered in the change Russell handed him, and arose slowly to his feet.

For an instant he stood gripping the chairback. The room was going around; the floor tilted dangerously.

"What's the matter, kid?" came in Fargo's voice. "You look sort of funny."

Lefty straightened himself with a great effort. "Nothing," he said, with laboriously distinct enunciation. "I've got a sort of headache. The bad air, I guess."

Then the men drifted over to the other table, bent on breaking up the game there, and Locke was left alone. He had given up wondering what was the matter with him. His one thought was to get out of the room while he could. Slowly he

turned and faced the door. A shout of laughter, followed by the sounds of a good-natured rough-house, told him that the attention of the others was occupied for the moment. He let go his hold on the chair, reeled, recovered himself with an effort, and, with set teeth, slowly, laboriously crossed the room.

It seemed an eternity before his hand touched the panels and fumbled for the knob. The next he knew he was in the still darkness of the hall, steadying himself against the wall. Somewhere in his head a sledge hammer was beating on an anvil. He wondered hazily how long flesh and bone could stand it. He took a step forward. Where was his room? Was it on this floor or the next?

At last he remembered, and began a slow, painful progress down the hall. Several times before reaching the stairs he fell, but at last he struck the bottom step and began to crawl up on hands and knees.

His room was directly opposite the elevator, or he would never have reached it. The door was, luckily, unlocked, and he managed to step in and close it behind him. As his finger instinctively pressed the electric button close at hand, flooding the room with light, he gave a sudden stifled cry.

He was to pitch to-morrow in the first practice game of the season. The remembrance stabbed through his fading senses like a knife. He had meant to show Brennan what there was in him. He had planned to strain every effort in order that the manager should forget his first unfortunate fiasco. And now—

He groaned aloud. Then, with a long, shuddering sigh, he felt his legs crumple under him. A black curtain fell before his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

ALL IN

WHEN Lefty came to himself the electric lights were still blazing in sickly opposition to the bright sunshine which poured through the two windows. For a moment or two he lay wondering what had happened and why he was stretched out on the floor, fully dressed. Then the dull, throbbing pain in his head brought him to a sitting posture, with a groan.

He glanced at the bed and saw that it was untouched. He looked up dazedly at the cluster of lights, then down at his rumpled shirtfront. The glitter of his gold fob caught his eye, and, with an effort, he pulled out his watch.

"Twenty-five minutes to eight," he muttered. "Time I was getting—"

He broke off abruptly and drew his breath with a swift intake as he remembered. The game was to begin at eight-thirty. He was to pitch for the Yannigans!

Staggering to his feet, he went over to the wash-

stand and plunged his face into a hurriedly drawn bowl of water. Nothing had ever felt so good before. He dashed it on his hair, regardless of the streams running over his shirtfront. Again and again he dropped his face back into the grateful, cooling contents of the bowl before he finally reached for a rough towel.

He remembered everything now—the absence of Brennan, the adjournment to Hagin's room, the cards, the smoke, the drinks, and—last of all—that horrible attack which had come upon him.

What had brought it about? It couldn't have been the beer. That was wretched stuff, to be sure, but a single glass of it would hardly produce such an effect. He had thrown his coat hastily to one side and was ripping the collar from his neck when suddenly he stopped abruptly.

"Doped!" he exclaimed, aloud.

It was an almost incredible supposition, but it explained everything perfectly. No single glass of ordinary beer could have the effect of that one upon a man in Lefty's splendid physical condition, and there was the odd, repulsive flavor which he had set down to the poor quality of the brew.

But who would do such a thing—and why? Locke's first thought was of Bert Elgin, but the fellow had not even been in the room. Hagin had

no motive—or, so far as he knew, any opportunity. Who else, then, could have been responsible?

The answer did not come readily, for Lefty's mind was working only by fits and starts as he flung his clothes right and left, threw a dressing gown over his shoulders, and darted down the hall to the shower which Brennan had caused to be put in for the benefit of his men. The tingling reaction of his blood under the icy spray meant much more to him than breakfast, for an intolerable lassitude seemed to grip his limbs, while the very thought of food was almost nauseating.

Lingering under the shower as long as he dared, he dashed back to his room and began to drag on his baseball clothes. It was not until he was buckling his belt, however, that the significance of Buck Fargo's remark when Lefty refused the second glass of beer came to him: "I reckon you *have* had enough." Why had he said that? Was it because he knew that the first glass was quite sufficient to do the business? There had been more to the big backstop's tone, somehow, than just plain, casual agreement.

"Rot!" snapped Locke, snatching up cap and glove and making for the door. "I'm loony! He hasn't a single motive, and, besides, he's not the sort of chap who'd do a dirty thing like that."

Nevertheless, the thought returned to torment him at odd moments during the hasty choking down of a little breakfast, followed by the jog out to the field—and afterward. It was the bitter disappointment and humiliation of that afterward which Lefty never forgot.

The cubs were in high spirits, eager for the chance to win their spurs. As he watched their antics on the way out to the park, Lefty felt a pang of envy. He would have given anything to have that same snap and ginger, instead of feeling the lassitude and weariness which gripped him.

Several of his teammates asked if he wasn't feeling well, but he forced a laugh, and put them off. He would rather have died than give up his place to Bert Elgin. When the time came for him to go into the box surely he would brace up and be more himself.

Halfway out to the field Andy Whalen, the cub catcher, came up, and they discussed briefly the signals which had been talked over the night before. Lefty wished desperately that he had gone off to bed directly afterward, instead of strolling into the pool room and allowing himself to be drawn into that game in Hagin's room.

Regrets were unavailing, however. Though some one had given him the double cross, Lefty

realized that he alone was to blame for making the opportunity. Then and there he registered a silent vow that nothing under heaven should ever again induce him to deviate a hair's breadth from his manager's rules of training. And then he wondered whether that resolution had been made too late.

The teams had ten minutes' practice in which to warm up; then the coin was tossed. The Yannigans won, and, choosing the field, romped gayly out to their positions, tossing up gloves, yelling persiflage at one another, and altogether behaving coltishly.

Lefty was with them, but not of them. He had never in his life felt in poorer condition for pitching. His head ached, and he was as tired and drooping as if he had not slept in forty-eight hours. But he could not bring himself to beg off, and there was no other way out. He caught the ball from Brennan, who acted as umpire, shot a swift, appraising glance at the manager's impenetrable face, and then took the signal from Whalen.

CHAPTER XII

LEFTY'S FAILURE

THE call was for a curve ball, and Lefty did his best to respond. Unfortunately he put so much curve into it that the sphere missed the plate by at least two feet. Whalen looked surprised, but said nothing. Lefty felt the blood rushing into his face and making his head pound more than ever.

The backstop then signaled for a fast straight ball, indicating with one hand that it was to cross the batter's shoulders. It was straight enough, but woefully lacking in speed, and Carl Siegrist promptly hit it on the trademark and dusted to first.

Had this been a championship game, the rangy infielder, who had hit well over three hundred for several seasons, would have made it good for two bags, or even three. Siegrist, like all the other old men, did not believe in straining himself unduly, however. He took things easy, and camped on the initial sack.

"Rotten!" snapped Ogan, from first. "What in Sam Hill's the matter with you, Locke?"

"Yes," chimed in Tom Burley, at short; "this isn't croquet. Wake up."

"Let's have a little of that smoke you had up your sleeve the other day," added the third baseman.

Lefty made no reply to these remarks. He was watching Brennan's face as the manager left the plate to take up his position behind the pitcher. Brennan looked anything but pleased, and, though he made no remark, Locke fancied he knew what was passing through his mind.

The next batter drew two balls in succession, and then created a momentary respite for Lefty by flying out to center field. His successor, however, smashed the first pitched ball over the infield, and romped down the line amid a howl of delight from the regulars, whose interest in the game was warming up.

Instantly a gatling fire of sarcasm was turned on Lefty by his teammates. Ogan raced into the diamond and caught the pitcher's arm.

"What do you think you're doing?" he hissed fiercely. "Are you trying to throw the game away?"

Lefty shook his head. His face was white now, his eye desperate. He knew he was making a miserable exhibition. He should not have started; he

should have gone to Ogan before the game and told him he wasn't in fit condition to pitch. His head was splitting so that he could scarcely see. He seemed to have no strength left in his arm.

"Perhaps you'd better take me out, Al," he muttered. "I seem to be on the fritz."

"You bet you are!" retorted the captain hotly. Then, catching a glimpse of Lefty's wretched face, he hesitated an instant. "I'll give you one more chance, Locke," he went on shortly. "If you don't make good, out you go. I'm not going to have this game handed over on a silver tray if I can help it. You've got the goods, Locke; brace up and hand 'em out."

When Ogan had gone back to his position, Lefty turned and glanced at the plate. His heart sank when he saw that Buck Fargo stood there, swinging his bat negligently. Nevertheless, with set teeth, the southpaw toed the rubber and pitched.

It was a straight, high ball that cut the plate in half, and Brennan's voice droned out "Strike!" as the batter let it pass. Lefty was heartened, and, at a signal from Whalen, he tried an out-curve. As before, this curved too far out even to cut a corner. Another ball followed, and then another strike. Then Fargo swung above a drop ball, and was declared out.

As the big backstop tossed his bat aside and strolled, grinning, to the bench, there was a sigh of relief from the Yannigan infield. Perhaps their pitcher was taking an almost-despaired-of brace. One or two gave voice to brief words of commendation; but Lefty did not hear them. He was staring after Fargo in a puzzled way. No one knew better than he—unless it was Andy Whalen—how far those deliveries had fallen short of his usual form. He could not understand why Buck had failed to make connections.

There was no time to think of that, however, for Bill Hagin was strutting to the plate. To Lefty his expression seemed more cocky and self-assured than ever, and the bush pitcher felt a sudden ardent longing to send him back to the bench as his predecessor had gone.

Whalen signaled for a drop, but Lefty had watched Hagin batting the day before, and felt that a straight, speedy one, placed high, would bother him more. He notified the catcher to that effect, toed the rubber, tried to forget his pounding head, gathered every muscle for the effort, and pitched.

The horsehide whirled toward the plate with speed enough, but crossed it a good foot below where Lefty intended. The bat met it squarely,

with every ounce of the big fielder's muscle behind it, and Lefty uttered a stifled groan of despairing surrender as the regulars began to circle the bases blithely.

What had gone before was as nothing to the roar which rose from the cubs when they saw three grinning players jog, one after the other, across the plate. As one man, they turned on Lefty and poured out the vials of their wrath in vivid, soul-stirring, mouth-filling phrases, which left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Interspersed with these gusts of abuse were yells of: "Take him out! Take—him—out!" which were quite unnecessary. Lefty realized that he was done for, and did not even glance toward Ogan as he walked toward the bench. He heard the latter's angry voice, however, yelling after him: "Get off the field, you boneheaded quitter!" And that seemed to hurt more than anything else.

He wasn't a quitter. He had done his best, and it was not his fault that he had failed. No doubt he should never have gone out there at all, but how many of those others, face to face with the alternative he had met that morning, would have decided differently?

Head down and hands tightly clenched, he made his way toward the bench, not even looking up as

he passed Bert Elgin, racing out to take his place. He flung himself down on the turf and lay there, chin propped in his cupped hands, eyes staring blindly out across the diamond.

More than once the regulars glanced curiously in his direction, but no one spoke. A little later, when the Yannigans trooped in, having succeeded in holding down the score, Lefty fully expected a storm of bitter reproaches to be hurled at him; but nothing came. The fellows took their places on the bench or the coaching lines without so much as a glance toward the chap lying there on the grass. For all the attention they paid to him, he might have been a log of wood.

As inning after inning passed amid that same studied silence and marked avoidance, Lefty felt that he would rather have endured sneers, blows, anything else. His head still throbbed and he was feeling wretched, mentally and physically. He was a fool not to have left the field at once; but, being there, his innate stubbornness kept him to the end.

Presently Jack Stillman came up and chatted casually for a minute or two, but Lefty was so mortally averse to pity that his replies were short almost to ungraciousness; and the reporter walked away, a puzzled look on his face.

By dint of fast, strenuous playing on the part of the cubs, assisted by the easy-going ways of their opponents, the regulars were kept from further scoring, while the Yannigans made two tallies before the end of the last inning. But for Locke's errors they would have won the game. The realization did not tend toward soothing their ruffled spirits.

As the teams mingled on the field at the end of the fifth inning, the one crowd grinning and josh-ing, the other responding with defensive sarcasm, Lefty caught an angry glare from more than one pair of eyes among the disappointed youngsters.

"I s'pose they all have it in for me," he mut-tered.

The next instant he saw Jim Brennan bearing down upon him, his face more florid than ever, his sharp eyes glinting.

"Good night!" the southpaw murmured. "Here's my finish."

Instinctively he rose to his feet and stood there, nervously juggling his glove, his eyes fixed upon the approaching manager, waiting for the storm to break.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DISCHARGED WAITER

LEFTY drew one sleeve across his perspiring face, and stared at the square, sturdy back of the retreating manager.

"Whew!" he muttered. "And then some!"

On second thought, he withdrew the comment. Jim Brennan had left nothing to be said, nothing to the imagination. In stinging phrases, which bit like acid and made the pitcher wince and grit his teeth, he had told his latest recruit exactly what he thought of such a disgrace among ball players.

He applied to Locke every epithet in his repertory—he had a vocabulary the width and breadth and startling nature of which was unusual even among Big League managers—and Lefty was obliged to stand there and swallow everything. He had nothing to say, no excuse to make for his behavior. He might have explained everything by telling Brennan of the glass of beer which he was certain had been drugged. But that would have put the whole crowd in bad, and Lefty was no telltale.

So he set his jaws, clenched his fists, and took everything the manager had to say, fully expecting the tirade to end in his being thrown out of the squad.

When Brennan finally concluded his spirited monologue with a pyrotechnic burst to the effect that he proposed taking the blankety-blank bonehead personally in hand the next morning for the purpose of beating a little elemental baseball into his thick skull, and then strode away with eyebrows twitching, it was a full minute before Lefty realized that it had not come. He had not been fired!

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he exclaimed aloud, his eyebrows drawn together in a puzzled frown. "Why didn't he do it? What use can he have for me after to-day?"

For a while he stood there, trying to fathom the reason. Then he gave it up and started for the gate. The others had long since left the park, and he made his way back to the hotel alone, took his shower, and came down to the dining-room ten minutes late.

For all the comfort he got out of his companions Lefty might as well have been alone at the table. From the beginning of the meal to its long-drawn-out finish not a single word was addressed directly

to him. The others talked over him, around him, at him, but never to him. Among themselves, but in tones which plainly showed that their remarks were aimed at Lefty, they discussed that miserable first inning in detail, pointing out how different the result would have been with any one but a quitter in the box. They made many other scornful comments, and the southpaw was hard pressed to maintain a stolid, impassive demeanor. Not for the world would he have them guess how much they were hurting him.

By supper time the determined ostracism of his cub companions had so worked on Lefty that his nerves were raw. He even caught Stillman regarding him queerly, and that was the last straw. He felt, somehow, that if he did not confide in some one he would blow up; so, after supper, he cornered his classmate in the lobby, and poured the whole story into his astonished ears.

When Locke had finished, Stillman gave a long whistle of incredulous astonishment.

"That's the rottenest thing I ever heard of!" he exclaimed indignantly. "No wonder you went to smash that way. But look here, old fellow, are you certain about the drug part of it? Isn't it possible that you had some sort of an attack of indigestion or something?"

Locke shook his head. "No indigestion would ever give a fellow feelings like that. Besides, I was fit as a fiddle before I went into that card game. Something was put into that beer, Jack; take my word for it."

"But who would do such a thing? You say Elgin you're sure wasn't even in the room. Did you notice anything queer about any other man's behavior?"

For an instant Lefty hesitated, the thought of Fargo's odd remark, with its odder inflection, in his mind. The next instant he gave a start as the big backstop strolled lazily up and paused beside his chair.

"Sort of off your feed to-day, ain't you, kid?" Fargo inquired, with a grin.

"I certainly am," Lefty answered. He hesitated a second, and then went on with deliberate purpose: "I reckon midnight poker games with all the fixings don't agree with me."

"Cut out the fixings and the poker won't hurt a baby," the catcher returned swiftly. "It's all right for the regular bunch to make fools of themselves swilling hard stuff if they want to, but you kids can't afford to do that sort of thing. I was watching you last night and wondering if you was going to fall for that nonsense."

A flash of sudden comprehension leaped into Locke's mind and brought the color swiftly to his face.

"So that was why you said I'd had enough!" he exclaimed.

Fargo looked slightly puzzled. "Sure! Why did you think I said it?"

Lefty's face was brick-red and his eyes dropped before the steady, open scrutiny of the catcher. "I—didn't realize you were—paying so much attention to me," he stammered. "I might have known, though, when you struck out to-day—to—to help me out. That was good of you, Fargo."

The backstop laughed. "Chase that notion out of your nut right off, son," he chuckled. "I ain't that crazy—yet. Reckon I must have been a bit off my feed, too, or else you took a spurt while I was up to the plate. I s'pose the old man sailed into you good and proper. He looked dangerous when I saw him heading your way after the game."

Locke explained briefly that the manager had raked him over the coals in a manner which left nothing to be desired. "I thought sure he'd end up by firing me out on the spot," he confessed in conclusion.

"Not him," grinned Fargo. "He's too sharp. You want to toe the mark, though, from now on. He'll have them snappy optics of his on you every minute of the day to see whether this was a fluke or your regular way of doing things. You'll have to show him, that's all."

As the backstop strolled off, Lefty's eyes followed him for a moment. He had been a fool to suspect for an instant that this big, rough-and-ready, but thoroughly straight, dependable fellow could be mixed up in anything so underhanded.

Stillman, whose trained mind had missed no point in the conversation, quickly broke the silence.

"You surely didn't think he had anything to do with it?" he questioned.

"I couldn't understand why he said something he did last night," Lefty explained. "I was an idiot, of course."

"You certainly were. Buck Fargo is one of the squarest men in the crowd, even if he is a little rough outside. He'd do anything in the world for a fellow he likes, and you're mighty lucky he's taken a fancy to you." He paused for an instant, his brow furrowed thoughtfully. "Look here, old fellow," he went on slowly, "why don't you get after the man who served those

drinks? I'll bet he knows a thing or two, and you ought to be able to sweat it out of him."

Lefty's eyes brightened. "By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's a good idea, Jack. I shouldn't wonder if he did. At least it'll be worth trying. He ought to be on duty now."

Without further delay, he arose and walked over to the desk. Though he did not know the fellow's name, he remembered perfectly what he looked like, and the clerk recognized his description at once.

"Oh, you mean George Miller? Why, the proprietor fired him this morning, Mr. Locke. He was stewed last night, and had a holdover this morning. He's left the hotel, and I don't know where you can find him."

Lefty turned from the desk, with a shrug. "That's settled," he thought disconsolately. "Why didn't I think of it before? I suppose I wasn't thinking of anything this morning, though."

As he walked back to where the newspaper man sat, he saw Bert Elgin crossing the lobby toward the door. For an instant he was moved to brace the fellow then and there and accuse him of playing that dirty trick the night before. Almost as quickly, however, he realized how futile that

would be. Though Elgin was the only man with a motive strong enough to make him suspected, Lefty had no shred of proof against him.

"Let him go," the latter muttered frowningly. "I haven't got anything on him—yet. I'll be hanged if I don't think he was at the bottom of it, though, and if I don't dig up the truth somehow, I *am* a bonehead."

CHAPTER XIV

BERT ELGIN'S LUCK

BERT ELGIN was decidedly a ladies' man. A pretty face in any of the front-rows of the grandstand never escaped his attention, and, no matter in what part of the country his team was playing, he seemed to have an almost uncanny faculty of scraping an acquaintance with the best-looking girl in town.

His teammates growled and grumbled enviously, making sarcastic references to luck and bluff and working the rah-rah racket to perfection, but Elgin remained undisturbed by their comments. There was no questioning the fact that he could be very charming when he chose to exert himself. He had a ready tongue, the knack of subtle flattery, and knew how to utilize the glamour which most girls throw about a prominent athlete who has had a college education.

Before he had been three days in Ashland Elgin maneuvered an introduction to Miss Molly Wendell, a charming young person with a penchant for baseball, and obtained permission to call.

Within a fortnight he had availed himself three times of that permission, and they were on very friendly terms, indeed.

This evening he arrayed himself with especial care, and sallied forth about half past seven, alone, from the hotel. Miss Wendell lived in the best residential section of town; but, as he made his way thither, Elgin was not so occupied with thoughts of the pleasure in store for him as to be blinded to the feminine charms of any chance passers-by. That was not his way.

Having bestowed appreciative and very open glances on several attractive factory girls hurrying along the main street, the cub pitcher struck into a quieter thoroughfare which led toward his destination. He had almost reached High Street when a rickety, swaying hack, looking as if it might have seen its best days in some Northern city a decade ago, passed him and came to a stop in front of the corner house.

Before the negro driver had time to open the door the horse—a big, raw-boned animal—took it into his head to back. Quite undisturbed and rather amused at the coon's flow of language, Elgin watched the ancient vehicle tilt dangerously until it seemed as if another moment would see it topple over. Then he came opposite the door,

glanced curiously into the hack, and the next instant became transformed.

With a single leap he reached the horse's head, gripping the bit with muscular fingers and dragging the animal forward a step or two.

"Get down here and hold the beast, uncle!" he ordered. "You're a nice one to take people out behind a dangerous animal like this. Hustle, now!"

The colored man hurriedly descended, muttering something about "interferin' w'ite trash," and sulkily obeyed. Elgin sprang to the door, hat in hand, and held it open.

"It's all right now, sir," he said deferentially. "Just take my arm, if you please, and let me help you out."

An elderly man, white-haired, frail-looking, and dressed in a clergyman's suit of black, obeyed tremblingly. He was followed much more swiftly by a young girl, a glimpse of whose lovely face had been the cause of that sudden transformation in Bert Elgin.

She barely touched the pitcher's arm as she leaped from the cab, the color bright in her cheeks, a glint of anger in her wonderful eyes.

"It's outrageous bringing us up with a horse like that!" she exclaimed indignantly. "You

know I asked particularly if he was gentle, and you said he was."

" 'Deed he am, leddy," the negro affirmed hastily. "Dis hyer am jes' his playful way. If dat gemman hadn't come—"

"If he hadn't so kindly come to our help," the girl put in emphatically, "we should have been upset."

As she stepped forward to pay the cabman she cast a glance of gratitude at Elgin, which started the blood tingling through his veins.

"What a peach!" he thought fervently.

Nothing of this appeared on the surface, however. Instinctively he schooled himself to retain the same respectful, deferential attitude he had assumed from the first. Still bareheaded, he seemed to be devoting all of his attention to the father, who was palpably nervous and upset by the incident. It was not until she turned from the negro and came back to them that his eyes met hers.

"I cannot thank you enough for what you have done," she said quickly. "My father is not very strong, and if the cab had upset it would have been simply dreadful."

"It was really nothing," Elgin protested. "I saw the horse was a bad-tempered brute, and got

to his head in time. I'm glad I happened to be passing."

"You cannot be more thankful than my daughter and myself," the older man put in rather weakly. "Your quick wit undoubtedly saved us from a serious accident. Just now I am too tired after a long journey to express my gratitude properly, but I hope you will give me the opportunity at some future time. I am the Reverend John Harting, and I shall be staying here a week or more with my friend, Henry Forsythe."

He held out a slim, white hand, which the ball player clasped firmly yet not too strenuously.

"My name is Bert Elgin," the younger man returned in respectful tones. "I'll be very glad indeed to come and see you some evening before you leave town."

"Yes, yes," the clergyman agreed, with impatience. "Janet, my dear, I think we had better go in. I am feeling—a little faint."

Without a word Elgin took one arm solicitously. The girl sprang to the other side of her father, and in silence they helped him up the steps of the veranda. A big, broad-shouldered man of middle age answered the ring, and, amid the bustle of greeting which followed, Elgin tactfully departed.

At the gate he paused, glancing back at the

closed door, the remembrance of a pair of wonderful violet eyes and a perfect mouth curved in a rather absent smile still vividly in his mind.

"A queen!" he said aloud. "Molly Wendell can't touch her for a minute." Slowly he moved on a few steps; then he chuckled: "That was a cute trick, all right, and pulled off to perfection. I ought to hand that old bag of bones a square feed for giving me the chance. Will I call to-morrow night and let the old geezer thank me? Will I? Ask me!"

CHAPTER XV

THE REASON WHY

OUT on the field next morning Lefty Locke threw himself heart and soul into his work. He was conscious that Manager Brennan was watching his efforts with the eyes of a lynx, and though that made him slightly nervous at first, it presently came to have the opposite effect, stimulating him to greater endeavor.

"Kid ain't doing bad to-day," drawled Buck Fargo critically to Jack Stillman, sitting beside him on the bench. "He certainly was rotten in the game, though. I wonder what ailed him? Don't seem like one glass of beer would knock a fellow out like that."

"Depends on what's in it besides the beer," the newspaper man replied impulsively.

The big backstop straightened up and flashed a keen glance at him.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded shortly.

Stillman hesitated an instant, his face slightly

flushed. "I suppose I shouldn't have said anything about it," he returned slowly. "Lefty didn't want it to get out, but I can't see any harm."

And forthwith he proceeded to enlighten Fargo concerning the trick which had been put over on Lefty the night Brennan was in Fort Worth. When he had finished, the catcher made some vividly picturesque comments. Then he relapsed into a thoughtful silence. Finally he turned curiously to his companion.

"What's the trouble between Elgin and Locke?" he asked briefly. "Don't tell me if it's a secret, but it sure looks to me as if that was at the bottom of the whole muss."

"There isn't a doubt of it in my mind," Stillman answered. "Elgin hates Lefty like poison, and has every reason in the world to do him dirt. It happened when we were all at Princeton. Elgin was pitching on the varsity—pitching mighty good ball, too. He and Lefty had always been rivals, but Lefty couldn't go out that year because of the back work he had to make up on account of an attack of typhoid. Just the same, Elgin seemed to have it in for him, and he never lost any chance to sneer about him to other men, and make things generally disagreeable.

"Well, about the middle of the season a chap named Bob Ferris had his pocketbook, watch, and a lot of little trinkets stolen. Somebody swiped 'em out of his room while he was at a lecture. He and Lefty were great friends and were in and out of each other's rooms all the time. Ferris couldn't find a single clew as to who had taken the stuff, but a few days later Lefty came in from a recitation unexpectedly and caught Bert Elgin in the hall right outside his door. He didn't say anything then, but went in and looked the room over. Nothing seemed out of place except a table drawer which was a little way open. When he jerked it out, there were two of the stolen scarf-pins lying right on top of a notebook belonging to Ferris, which he would probably have come in to get that very afternoon."

"The cur!" rasped Fargo. "He put 'em there a-purpose to throw the blame on Locke."

"Exactly. Lefty followed Elgin to his room, told him what he'd found out, and started to give him a nice comfortable thrashing. In the process of the scrimmage a watch fell out of Elgin's pocket. It was Ferris' watch. Lefty told Ferris afterward that the sight of it made him ashamed to be soiling his hands on such a mucker. He let up right away, told Elgin that

unless the stolen goods were returned in twenty-four hours he'd go to the dean and tell him everything, and got out. Ferris was in New York that day, but when he got back next morning the stuff was all on his bureau."

Fargo stared at him an instant. "Well?" he queried sharply. "Is that all? Didn't they put anybody wise to what the sneak had done?"

Stillman shook his head. "No. He'd have been fired out of college, and there wasn't anybody to take his place on the nine. Lefty and Ferris talked it all over and decided to keep still for the sake of the varsity."

"Humph!" grunted the big backstop. "I'll be hanged if I'd have done it!" He paused a moment, interlacing his strong, brown fingers. "Well, there ain't any doubt that's what started things going here," he went on. "Elgin's sore as a boil, of course, to have Locke around, knowing what he does about this stealing. How he worked this dope trick gets me, though."

The newspaper man started to explain his theory of the waiter's complicity, but in the midst of it the manager roared out an order to Fargo to get into the game and limber up some. The big backstop obeyed and was kept busy for the rest of the morning. Later on, however, he

sought Stillman again, to hear the remainder of the story.

When it had been told he made no comment. His face showed plainly, however, that his interest was aroused to an unusual degree; and the reporter congratulated himself on having secured a valuable ally for Lefty.

CHAPTER XVI

THE PURLOINED LETTER

IT was rather difficult for Lefty to tell what sort of an impression the day's work had made on Jim Brennan. That astute individual was thoroughly proficient in the art of keeping his thoughts to himself, and it was almost impossible for any one to guess what was going on in his mind. Those who knew him well had long ago ceased to guess.

He had watched Locke all day as a cat does a mouse, picking at the least fault, hurling criticisms in that brusque, snappy way of his at the slightest opening, and never once giving his cub pitcher a word of praise. There seemed to be nothing in this to encourage the southpaw.

Nevertheless, Lefty knew that he was in good form. He felt that between his work of to-day and that disgraceful exhibition of twenty-four hours ago there was a vast gulf, and he was comforted. And when, along toward the middle of the afternoon, he began to notice quite lengthy periods of silence on the part of his mentor—spaces of five minutes, or even longer, in which

the manager could find absolutely nothing to carp at—his spirits began to rise.

On the way back to the hotel several of the older men who had been up before him during the afternoon paused and made brief, half-joshing comments on his improvement. Stillman was enthusiastic in his praise, and even one of his brother reporters delivered himself of a more guarded opinion, practically to the same effect. To be sure, the silence of the other cubs was deep and absolute. Not one of them opened his head to Lefty on any subject, much less to tell him that he was doing well. Evidently the ban against him was still in force.

In spite of this, however, Locke was feeling more hopeful, more assured, more satisfied that he could make good, than at any time since his arrival at training camp.

"I'll write Janet to-night," he thought, while he was dressing, "and tell her all about it. I should have done it before, but things have been pretty uncertain."

Janet might have been a sister, but—she wasn't. Any one observing the length of the letter Lefty wrote after dinner, and the pains taken with its composition, would have guessed that instantly. A fellow rarely sends more than four pages of

closely written hotel paper to a relative, and as for tearing up a nearly finished sheet, and rewriting it—well, that settled the question.

When the epistle had been carefully sealed and the envelope directed, Locke found he was out of stamps, and purchased some at the desk. He had just affixed one to the letter when Buck Fargo appeared and pounced on him.

"Been looking for you, kid," the backstop announced, taking Locke by the arm. "Come out with me for a little walk. I want to talk to you."

Locke acquiesced readily and, without turning, reached back for the letter he had left lying on the desk. He was so taken up with wondering what Fargo had on his mind that his action was really little more than mechanical. His fingers closed over an envelope which he thrust into a side pocket, and the two walked briskly away.

Unfortunately for Lefty the proprietor of the Hatchford was of an economical turn of mind. Having been considerably fretted by every Tom, Dick, and Harry in Ashland dropping in and using his letter paper *ad libitum,* he instituted the system of having a supply at the desk, and nowhere else. When a guest of the house wanted stationery he helped himself. A townsman could do the

same, if he wished. But the mere fact of having to face the argus-eyed clerk, instead of slipping quietly to a well-furnished desk, acted as a strong deterrent.

When Lefty bought his stamps the supply of envelopes had dwindled to three, two of them stuck inside the flap of the third. They lay close beside his letter on the desk, and when he reached back without looking it was the three empty envelopes, stuck together as one, that he picked up and put into his pocket.

His carefully composed epistle lay, face upward, where he had left it. The clerk was busy with his books, and no one else happened to see it until Bert Elgin, as immaculately garbed as he had been the night before, on his way to the street, paused to light a cigarette.

The match flared up and he had conveyed it halfway to the weed between his lips when suddenly the motion was arrested, and he stared downward with widening eyes. For an instant he could scarcely believe his senses. Before him lay a letter addressed to the very girl whose charms had so smitten him the night before, and on whom he expected to call within fifteen minutes.

There was no doubt about it. "Miss Janet Harting," written in a strong, masculine hand,

stared up at him like a basilisk. Some one in this very hotel was corresponding with her—some one who did not know that she had arrived at Ashland the night before; for the address was a New England town.

"Kingsbridge!" The word came hissing through his clenched teeth as he remembered suddenly that this was the name of the team on which Lefty Locke had pitched during the past summer.

The forgotten match burned his fingers, and he flung it to the floor. A second later, however, he reached over to where a box of them lay, and struck one, leaning close against the desk as he did so. When he moved away, the cigarette alight, his face was still slightly flushed, but his expression was once more composed. The letter had disappeared.

Once in the street, he hurried along, scarcely able to restrain his impatience. Twice he hesitated by a lighted window, but each time the place seemed too public for his purpose. At last he stopped before a little store on a corner, glanced swiftly and suspiciously around, and drew the letter from his pocket.

For a moment he stood scowling at the superscription before he ripped the envelope open. The frown deepened as he noticed the length of

the inclosure, and then, with narrowed eyes, he sought the signature.

"Hazelton!" he muttered hoarsely. "I knew it!"

Rapidly, with now and then a nervous glance around, his eyes flew over the closely filled pages. The letter had evidently been written by one very good friend to another. There was little in it which any one might not have read, yet its very tone, with those references to past experiences together, to mutual friends, to hopes and fears and interests held in common, sent Bert Elgin off into a spasm of rage. He had plumed himself on having, with great dexterity and presence of mind, obtained the inside track with quite the most fascinating girl that he had ever seen, only to discover that the man he hated with every fiber of his being seemed to have the inside track.

"Confound him!" he cried, crushing the letter between his fingers, "I can't seem to get away from him."

For a moment he stood there hesitating, his fingers busy tearing the purloined letter into shreds. Then he turned the corner, and began to walk hurriedly toward High Street.

"I'll beat him yet!" he vowed. "I'll put him out of the running here, or I'm a dub!"

CHAPTER XVII

GUILE

"REALLY?" exclaimed Janet Harting, her eyes sparkling. Then she laughed. "It's luck you didn't tell father. He has an idea that professional ball players aren't quite respectable."

Bert Elgin bent slightly forward, a hurt expression in the eyes fixed upon her face. During the fifteen minutes in which he had labored strenuously to ingratiate himself with her father, and succeeded beyond his hopes, he had gathered, by skillful probing, the impression that the older man was just the sort to look askance on professional athletics. Not a hint of this now appeared on the surface, however. His voice was regretful, with just the proper touch of indignation in it.

"I hope you don't share his prejudice, Miss Harting?" he said quickly.

"Not at all," the girl hastened to assure him. "I adore baseball, and could never understand why a man shouldn't take it up just as he would any other profession. It's much better paid than

many, and I'm sure it must be a great deal pleasanter than being cooped up all day in a stuffy office."

Elgin's sigh of relief was unmistakable. "I can't tell you how glad I am to hear you say that," he returned, his face clearing. "Your father is a clergyman of the old school, and I can quite understand his prejudice. But professional baseball to-day is very different from what it was in his time. There isn't a cleaner, decenter sport going, or one more free from crookedness. Of course, there are people who look down on it. There are even players"—his voice took on a sneering tone—"who go into it under fictitious names, but they're cads and bounders. I notice they're not ashamed to draw their salary checks on the dot. I've played ball ever since I left college, and I can truly say, Miss Harting, that I've never once had reason to regret my choice of a profession."

For a moment there was silence. The girl's cheeks were faintly flushed and she was plucking absently at the fringe hanging from the upholstered chair arm.

"I'm sure you haven't, Mr. Elgin," she murmured presently. There was another momentary pause before she raised her eyes to his face. "I

believe that what you say about a man's playing under a false name is generally true, but don't you think that once in a while there may be a perfectly good reason for it?"

The pitcher shrugged his shoulders. "Once in a thousand times, perhaps," he admitted. "It's easy enough to invent a plausible reason, but I've noticed invariably that fellows do it because they're ashamed, not of playing professional ball, but of having their friends know it. There's an instance of this right here in the Hornet squad, a chap who graduated from Princeton the year after I did. He tried making his living as a lawyer, fell down hard, and then took up baseball. There isn't an earthly reason why he shouldn't use his own name, and yet he's masquerading as Tom Locke."

"Locke!" the girl gasped, staring in startled amazement. "You don't mean to say that Phil Hazelton is *here?*"

Elgin's jaw dropped most realistically, and he drew his breath sharply.

"You—know him?" he faltered.

"Of course I do. Why, he pitched all last summer for the Kingsbridge team. That's where I've always lived, you know, until father's health began to fail, and he was sent South by one of his

wealthy parishioners. Philip Hazelton is a perfectly splendid fellow, and we're great friends."

Elgin's face was the picture of confusion. "I —beg your pardon, Miss Harting," he stammered. "I—I had no idea—you knew him, or I should never have mentioned his name."

His expression was so contrite that the girl laughed merrily.

"Of course you didn't," she returned. "How should you when I haven't even told you where I lived? I'll forgive you, though, for otherwise I might never have known he was here. I'm sure, Mr. Elgin, if you knew Phil Hazelton as well as I do you'd admit that he was the thousandth man you spoke of a while ago who has a perfectly legitimate reason for not playing under his own name."

"Very likely," Elgin returned hastily. "I don't doubt that you're right."

His voice was quite lacking in conviction, however. It was the tone of one agreeing out of mere politeness and because he was anxious to get away from a disagreeable subject.

Miss Harting, being keen of perception, noticed this, and her smile faded.

"You don't really mean that?" she said abruptly.

Elgin spread out his hands depreciatingly. "I

wish you wouldn't," he returned. "A fellow can't help having his opinions, you know. Let's change the subject."

"But I don't want to change the subject," she retorted warmly. "I insist on your telling me why you don't agree with me."

The pitcher's long lashes drooped over his eyes, and he bit his lip.

"I knew Hazelton very well at college," he began slowly. "We were friends until—certain things—came up which showed me—" he threw back his head, and looked her full in the eyes. "I can't do it!" he burst out. "Please don't ask me, Miss Harting. I've said more now than I should have. No matter what my opinion of him may be, I won't talk about a fellow behind his back."

His attitude of manly embarrassment was so well done that the girl was completely deceived. She was angry at herself for having led the conversation into this channel, but her estimation of this man who would say nothing against another with whom he was evidently not on friendly terms, increased by leaps and bounds.

They chatted on various other topics for a little while, but the conversation could not fail to be slightly constrained, and Elgin soon took his leave.

After he had gone Janet Harting returned to the parlor and stood for a space leaning thoughtfully against the mantel.

"It's absurd!" she exclaimed aloud presently. "There's been some misunderstanding between them. I won't believe that Phil is anything but straightforward and absolutely honorable. He couldn't do or think a mean thing. I'll forget that I ever heard a whisper against him."

But this was not quite possible. In spite of her determination, a nagging little doubt returned more than once to trouble Janet Harting. Somehow, she could not forget that Bert Elgin had known Hazelton at college—known him for years probably, with chances for seeing phases of his character which the intimate life at a big university alone can give; while her own acquaintance with that selfsame individual was limited to nine brief months.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN IN THE CORRIDOR

"HANG such weather!" grumbled Buck Fargo, gazing disconsolately out of the dripping window.

It was not a strictly original remark, considering the fact that it had been uttered, in some form or another, on an average of every five minutes since breakfast time. Nevertheless, it was fervently echoed by each one of the players who lounged within hearing distance in the lobby.

It had been pouring all day, a cold, driving rain, which kept some forty-odd active, vigorous athletes cooped up in the confines of the hotel.

It was not so bad in the morning, but by the middle of the afternoon pool had lost its charm, craps failed to interest; and even the inveterate poker players were becoming satiated with that game.

"I can feel myself putting on pounds and pounds," mourned "Splinter" Jones, one of the outfielders, whose winter of luxurious idleness had resulted in about fifteen pounds of trouble-

some and unnecessary weight. "It'll set me back a week."

"Too bad there ain't a Turkish bath in this blooming village," yawned Cy Russell. "If we was only in little old New York you could sit in a steam room and lose all the weight you wanted to."

Fargo turned suddenly from the window, his eyes sparkling.

"Gee whiz, Cy!" he exclaimed. "That ain't a bad idea. Why can't we fix up one?"

The pitcher's eyes widened. "Fix up what?" he inquired. "A Turkish bath? You talk nutty, Buck."

"Nix! It's a cinch! One thing good about this hash house is they've always got plenty of hot water. What's to prevent our hiking up to one of the bathrooms, stopping the cracks with towels, and turning on the hot water full. I'll guarantee in ten minutes you couldn't see across the room. Moreover, the radiators are all red-hot to-day, and if we wrap Splinter up in blankets and set him down on one in the bathroom, we'll see him oozing away to a shadow before our very eyes."

Jones straightened up in his chair, his lips pursed disapprovingly.

"Not me," he declared firmly. "Mebbe I've

done some fool things in my life, but I never yet set down on a red-hot radiator without my clothes on, and I ain't going to begin now."

"You loon!" grinned Fargo. "Did you think I meant without something under you to keep you from getting scorched? I ain't got it in for you that bad. A bunch of bath towels'll do the trick and make you so comfortable you'll be going to sleep. Come on, boy! Be a sport."

The others added their persuasions, and at length the stout outfielder yielded. The thought of parting with five or six pounds at one fell swoop was irresistible. He presently arose and, escorted by eight or ten fellows, made his way to the upper regions.

Lefty Locke did not happen to be in the lobby to see them go. He had gone up to his room soon after dinner, read several chapters in a volume of Dickens, and taken a sudden notion to write to his kid brother. By the time the letter was finished and he had pottered around a little longer, fretting at the downpour and regretting that he had not been able to keep up the good work commenced on the field the day before, it was nearly half past four.

"Reckon I'll go down and scare up somebody for a game of billiards," he thought.

As he opened the door and stepped into the hall, he saw the figure of a man walking briskly away down the corridor. For a moment he paid no attention to the unknown. Presently something about the set of the fellow's shoulders struck him as vaguely familiar, but even then he would probably have thought nothing of it had not the other swiftly turned his head, and as swiftly jerked his face around again.

It was George Miller, the discharged waiter who had served Locke that fatal glass of doped beer two nights before.

Without delay, Lefty started to run. The waiter took to his heels, also, whirled round a corner toward the servants' staircase at top speed, and disappeared.

Sprinting after him, Locke reached the corner just in time to see his man halfway down the long stretch of carpeted hall. The next instant a wild yell of pain and rage from somewhere close at hand broke the stillness with startling abruptness. A door at Lefty's right was flung open. Buck Fargo, his face contorted with mirth, rushed out, flung himself against the door of the next room, and slammed it behind him, all in the twinkling of an eye.

Lefty, bewildered, had no time even to wonder

what had happened. Close upon the heels of the flying catcher came a strange figure, clad in blankets and nothing else, and giving vent to a continuous bellow of rage. He did not halt or pause. The whole impact of his big body struck Locke squarely, and they landed together on the floor with a crash which seemed to shake the building.

CHAPTER XIX

NOT QUITE PROVEN

"BLUE blazes!" roared Splinter Jones, his hands clutching Lefty's windpipe. "You bonehead! You mutt! I'll teach you to pull them towels from under me! I'm scalded—parboiled—burned to a crisp! Wough!"

Lefty grabbed the other's wrists and, with a twist and a wriggle, freed his throat from the choking grasp.

"Let up!" he panted. "What do you think you're doing, Jones? Are you nutty?"

The outfielder gasped and grunted with surprise. An instant later he had rolled over so that the cub pitcher's face was plainly visible, and his eyes fairly popped out.

"By thunder!" he groaned. "I thought you was Fargo."

A roar of delight issued from the open doorway. As Lefty sprang up, he saw that it was crowded with members of the Hornet squad, several of them in next to nature's garb, and all convulsed with mirth. Behind them rose vagrant

eddies of what looked like smoke, but had the hot, suffocating tang of steam.

"Come and see our Turkish bath, Kid," invited Cy Russell when he had recovered his power of speech. "Buck invented it, but something kind of went wrong, and he beat it."

"Went wrong!" snapped Jones, stung afresh by a sense of his injuries. "The pirate did it on purpose! Just wait till I get my hands on him-I'll make him smart!"

He looked so ridiculous as he stood there, scowling fiercely and trying to gather the inadequate folds of the scanty blanket around him, that another burst of laughter commenced. It was cut short, however, by the whirring of the elevator.

"Come inside, you loon!" ejaculated Russell, grabbing the outfielder by the arm and hustling him into the room. "You ain't decent. What if a woman should come along!"

At the suggestion the men all scuttled out of sight. Lefty followed them. The interruption had given Miller ample time to make himself scarce, and, besides, Locke was curious to learn more of the trick which had been played on Jones.

It proved to be simple to a degree. The improvised Turkish bath had been an unqualified success, as Lefty realized the instant he entered

the superheated bathroom, where the atmosphere made him fairly gasp for breath. The water still boiled from the tap, sending up clouds of steam. In one corner was the fateful radiator that had aided Fargo in the perpetration of the prank which justly aroused the wrath of Jones.

Until Buck Fargo's unfortunate propensity for joking had got the better of him, everything had gone smoothly. Jones and several other players who thought they could stand a little less weight stripped, swathed themselves in blankets, and took turns sitting on the sizzling radiator, well protected by several thicknesses of bath toweling. Perspiration streamed from every pore as superfluous tissue oozed away.

After each man had indulged in several rounds of the sweating process, it was observed that Jones was monopolizing the newly discovered boon. Protests were unavailing. He simply sat on the radiator until he could stand the heat no longer, regardless of the clamorous waiting list, and Russell was on the point of using force when he received an unmistakably insignificant wink from Buck Fargo, which made him refrain from butting in.

When the outfielder's turn came again, he carefully adjusted the blankets about him and ap-

proached the radiator. The others were all gathered around, uttering various joshing comments. The big backstop leaned carelessly against the wall close to the heated coils. The room was hazy with steam pouring out of the faucet of the bathtub.

Cautiously Jones parted the blankets, and let himself down slowly, quite oblivious to the fact that Fargo had removed the towels with a dexterous twitch. The next instant a fearful yell rent the air, and the outfielder shot up as if galvanized, caught sight of the catcher slipping out of the door, and flung himself after in hot pursuit, with the resultant upsetting of Lefty Locke's plans.

The latter was not quite so entertained by the joke as he might have been had it not caused him to lose the waiter. He was swiftly becoming more and more convinced that, if he could only once get hold of the fellow and bring a little pressure to bear upon him, Miller might tell him a lot.

What was the man doing back in the hotel, anyway? Lefty wondered as he took the elevator downstairs. The mere fact of his presence in that corridor after he had been fired looked suspicious.

"It's a shame I didn't come out of my room a minute sooner," the cub pitcher grumbled to himself as he entered the lobby. "I'd have nailed

him. By Jove, Jack! You're just the chap I want to see." He caught Stillman by the arm, and propelled him toward a couple of empty chairs near by. "Who do you think I saw up in our corridor about fifteen minutes ago?"

"That waiter who was fired yesterday morning," the newspaper man returned without an instant's hesitation.

Lefty gasped. "What! Did you see him too?"

"No; but I heard him talking to Elgin. Our rooms adjoin, you know, and there's a connecting door which is locked. I was up there, doping out some stuff to send to the paper, when I began to hear scraps of talk coming through the door. Didn't pay much attention at first, for I wanted to get my story off in the five-thirty mail, but I made out that somebody was trying to get money out of our friend. That made me sit up and take a little more notice. The chap wanted fifteen dollars to take him to Dallas. Elgin balked, of course, and then the waiter said it would be the last touch he'd make, and, anyhow, it was little enough, considering all he'd done for Elgin. They scrapped back and forth for a bit, and then I reckon Elgin shelled out, for I didn't hear anything more.

"The fool part of it was that I never wised up

to who he was till afterward. I was thinking about my news dope, I suppose. Anyhow, it wasn't till after I'd got that out of the way that I began to wonder whether the strange guy might not have been this man we want to get hold of. It certainly looked a bit like it, his bleeding Elgin that way."

"Didn't he say anything about what he'd done for Elgin?" Lefty asked eagerly.

"No, or I'd have woke up in a jiffy. It was only that he'd done something which put him personally to the bad. I haven't a doubt now as to what that something was, but I'm afraid there isn't anything you could call real proof."

Locke shook his head. "I'm afraid not," he agreed slowly.

More than ever he regretted that he had missed the rascal in the corridor by a hair's breadth. Truly, luck seemed to be with Bert Elgin in everything he undertook.

CHAPTER XX

JANET HARTING WONDERS

LEFTY did not devote much more thought that night to Bert Elgin and his doings Just before supper a letter arrived which drove every other idea from his head. For a second or two he stood staring at the familiar handwriting, wondering how in the world Janet had found out where he was. When he hastily slit the envelope and took in the meaning of the few lines on that single sheet of paper, his astonishment knew no bounds.

First he gave a long whistle. Then a wide grin overspread his face. It did not much matter what had brought the girl to Ashland, the fact remained that she was here and that he would see her that night. That was all that really counted.

He ate his supper hurriedly, oblivious for the first time to the continued coldness of his companions. His thoughts were elsewhere. Afterward he hastened up to his room and changed his clothes. Half an hour later he was running up the steps of the house on High Street.

Janet received him alone, her father having retired directly after dinner. To Lefty she seemed prettier than ever, and there was no mistaking her pleasure in seeing him. After the first greetings were over, they sat down on the sofa, each eager to hear all about the other's doings.

"Father hasn't been very well all winter," the girl explained in answer to Lefty's first question. "You remember my writing to you how he kept catching colds so easily, and couldn't seem to shake them off? His rheumatism was worse than it had ever been before, too, and I was beginning to get really worried about him when one day, about a week ago, Cyrus King came in, and told father he'd arranged for us to go South and stay till spring. You know that gruff, positive way he has? Well, he'd planned it all out before he said a word to us, insisted on paying our expenses, and wouldn't even let us thank him. Of course, he has quantities of money, and he and father are such old friends I didn't mind much taking it from him."

"It was good of him!" Lefty said warmly. "But how in the world did you happen to pick on Ashland to come to? That's what I don't quite understand."

"We didn't. At least, that's not where we're

going to settle down. Doctor Lansing knew about some wonderful mineral springs at Billings, farther south in the State, and advised us to go there. We've only stopped off here for a week or ten days to see father's old friend, Mr. Forsythe."

Lefty nodded and leaned back, his muscular fingers linked loosely over one knee.

"I see. But what gets me is how you knew I was here. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I got your note. I suppose you must have seen my name in some paper that listed me as one of Brennan's new recruits."

She shook her head. Her lips were half smiling, but her eyes were fixed on his face with an odd sort of intentness.

"No," she returned quietly. "Mr. Elgin told me."

"Elgin?" Locke repeated incredulously. "You can't possibly mean Bert Elgin? I know you can't mean that man!"

Annoyed by the astonishment and involuntary disapproval in his voice, she drew herself up the least bit. If there was one quality on which Janet Harting prided herself it was her judgment, and she had never allowed any one save her father to criticise a person on whom she chose to bestow her friendship.

"Why not?" she retorted. "I like him very much. Besides, he was the means of saving father and me from a serious accident."

She went on briefly to tell how the acquaintance had come about, and Lefty listened in frowning silence, gnawing his under lip with firm white teeth.

Perhaps it was just as well that he had been prevented from giving vent to that first natural outburst of indignation which leaped up within him. The discovery that Elgin, of all men, had made the acquaintance and apparently won the liking of this girl filled him with intense anger. The cur wasn't fit even to speak to her, and in that moment Lefty detested him as never before. Only the impossibility of interrupting Janet kept him from pouring out an impulsive account of what he knew about the scoundrel, and the even more contemptible things he suspected.

But, with the passing of that first throb of anger, Locke felt that this would merely make matters worse. Certain as he was in his own mind of Elgin's complicity in the plot against himself, he had no real proof, and anything he might say against the man would seem like the product of jealousy.

"He came to call last night," the girl concluded,

"and father was quite charmed with him." She hesitated an instant, and then went on slowly: "I'm afraid you're not very good friends, are you, Phil?"

"Oh! You gathered that, did you?" Lefty said stiffy. "I suppose he blackguarded me to beat the band."

"He did nothing of the sort. He never said a word against you. I simply got the impression from his manner, and thought it was a pity you shouldn't be on better terms."

"That's out of the question," Lefty retorted shortly. He was perplexed over his inability to let her know exactly what sort of a man Bert Elgin was, and that added no little asperity to his manner. "We could never be friends."

Janet sighed a little. She was very human, and where is the girl who is not thrilled by the thought of reconciling old enemies and healing old sores by her influence? She did not give up hope of some day accomplishing it in this case. She only realized that nothing more could be done at present, and, womanlike, tucking it away in her mind for future use, changed the subject abruptly.

"You really didn't deserve to have me write you," she said more lightly, "after the way you've neglected me lately. You must have got my last

letter over two weeks ago, and I haven't heard a word from you since."

"I know it," Lefty acknowledged. "I ought to have written, but everything came about so unexpectedly, Janet, that I put it off till I could have something definite to tell you. Just because I'm with a Big League team now doesn't mean I'll stay. I've got to make good, and there were two or three things at first which handicapped me so that I had very serious doubts of ever doing it. I did write you a long letter last night, though, but naturally I sent it to Kingsbridge. You'll probably get it in a week or so."

"Yes; all my mail is forwarded. But of course you'll make good, Phil. I don't see how you can have any doubt of it. Just look at the wonderful way you pitched last summer."

Lefty smiled whimsically. "It's very nice of you to think that, Janet," he said. "But there's a lot of difference between last summer and now. This crowd is one of the fastest in the country, and I'll have to be on the jump every minute of the time to keep up with them. I really do think I have a show, though, and that's what made me write to you."

"I'm sure you have," the girl returned pos-

itively. "Do you have any games? I'm crazy to see you pitch."

"There's a short practice game every day, but I don't know how soon they'll give me a chance on the slab. I'll tell you what: If I find I'm going to be used, I'll tell you or send you word, and you can come out to see the game. If that doesn't happen before you leave here, you'd better come, anyway; for the playing is worth seeing."

"Good!" returned Janet. "I'd love to come, and I can bring Jean Forsythe. She's awfully nice, and crazy about baseball." She paused for an instant, and then went on, more slowly: "I should think, now that you're in the Big League, Phil, you'd play under your own name. You're not ashamed to, are you?"

"Great Scott, no!" Lefty exclaimed. "What put that notion into your head? You know how impossible it was to use my own name last summer, and, now that I've made what reputation I have under the name of Locke, it wouldn't be good policy to change. You should remember that I have a father, also, who is strongly prejudiced against baseball, and I see no need of dragging the name of Hazelton into it. There's not much in a name, anyhow. Many fellows take a

different one, or have one thrust upon them by the fans."

There was a note of finality in his voice which made the girl realize the futility of continuing the subject. She was wise enough not to try, but after he had gone she could not help remembering Bert Elgin's scornful remark that a professional could always find plenty of plausible excuses for playing under a name which was not his own.

CHAPTER XXI

THE YELLOW STREAK

"BELIEVE me, fellows," Bill Hagin said fervently, "that cub, Elgin, is some scrapper."

There was a sniff of incredulity from the half dozen regulars gathered near the plate waiting their turn. They had heard before of these pugilistic prodigies, and were inclined to be doubtful.

"I'm from Missouri, Bill," drawled Russell.

"Well, if you'd been up in my room last night, you'd been shown good and proper," Hagin retorted. "Elgin put it all over One-round Nolan in the prettiest way you ever saw."

At this announcement several of the men began to sit up and take notice; for Ed Nolan, the Hornet's crack third baseman, was also renowned for his skill with the gloves.

"Quit your kidding, Bill," admonished Red Pollock. "You can't tell me no cub put it over Ed."

"Truest thing you know," averred the outfielder

fervently. "Ask Monte Harris, or Dutch, if you don't believe me. We was all talking downstairs about the match between Kid Baker and Young Glover in Memphis to-morrow, and Ross—he's that punky cub fielder—says he'd back Elgin against any amateur in his class. Nolan picks up his ears, and, one word leading to another, we goes up to my room to call his bluff. Take it from me, there wasn't any bluff about the kid, though. He's got science and speed to burn, and the dandiest left hand wallop you ever saw. It sent Nolan sprawling in the third round as nice as could be, and Ed ain't no slouch. I sure wish you all could have seen it."

"Why in thunder didn't you put us wise, then?" demanded Russell indignantly. "You're a hot sketch, pulling off a scrap and letting nobody in."

A chorus of similar reproaches were hurled at Hagin from all sides, mingled with eager queries about Elgin's other good points, and calls for a more detailed description of the bout.

Buck Fargo alone sat unmoved and apparently incurious, a look of incredulity on his face. He was thinking of that night in the Palace Theater when Elgin had slipped away, leaving Lefty to face the wrathy mob alone. He remembered, also, the story Jack Stillman had told him of the beat-

ing Locke had started to give his college mate three years before at Princeton, and he smiled a wide, disbelieving smile as he listened to Hagin's vivid description of the cub pitcher's prowess with his fists.

But when, later in the day, Monte Harris and Carl Siegrist backed up the statement, and even Nolan himself admitted sourly that "the kid wasn't so worse," Fargo grew puzzled.

"Something queer about this," he thought. "Looks like I'd have to do a little investigating on my own hook."

All morning he was preoccupied and thoughtful, only arousing himself when Brennan's eye was upon him, and even then quite lacking in his usual joshing repartee. Once or twice he noticed with a sort of absent approbation that Lefty was showing some steam and curves in the work-out with other pitchers; but aside from that he paid little attention to anything.

During dinner his abstraction continued, but afterward, on the way back to the field, he might have been observed suddenly to slap one thigh with his hand, and mutter something under his breath. After that he was the old Buck Fargo again.

The daily practice game now took place in the

afternoon, leaving the morning for batting practice, throwing, running, and various other exercises. Ogan, the captain of the cubs, put Redmond, a fairly promising young twirler, into the box, but at the end of the second inning withdrew him, and substituted Bert Elgin.

The latter seemed to be in fine form, and started off by fanning Cy Russell. The second man up flied out to center field, and then Fargo came to the bat. Elgin's first delivery just missed the outside corner of the plate. He then put over a straight, swift one, and Fargo, seemingly "playing the game," let it pass. The cub pitcher then wound himself up for the elusive curve which was one of his pet specialties.

The ball whirled toward the pan, apparently heading straight at the batter. Fargo took a quick step back, then lunged forward. The next instant he dropped his bat with an exclamation of anger and pain as the sphere struck his arm with a dull impact.

His face contorted, the big backstop trotted toward first, rubbing the injured member, and shooting at Elgin some extremely vivid and forceful comments out of the corner of his mouth.

The incident flustered the latter to such an extent that he whipped a straight one over, which

cut the center of the pan, and it was smashed out by Siegrist. The next man up sacrificed Fargo home, but Elgin took a brace; and shut out the regulars from further scoring.

The game progressed in comparative peace and harmony for two innings. Then, strangely enough, Fargo was hit again by the second pitched ball, and instantly the air was blue. His previous remarks were as nothing to the words which now issued from his lips as he glared at the offending youngster, and they only ceased when Jim Brennan ordered sharply: "Quit that blackguarding, and take your base."

In spite of these two unfortunate happenings, the cubs nailed the game by a single run; for their opponents had not yet reached the point where they were willing to exert themselves overmuch. That run was scored in the last inning by Elgin, cleverly assisted by Ogan and Andy Whalen; and the instant the game was over the players streaked across the field toward the gate.

Elgin alone lingered behind to get his glove, which he had tossed over near the bench. Oddly enough, it was nowhere to be seen. Having been much too occupied to notice anything outside the diamond during the past ten minutes, he had failed to see Fargo scoop up that same useful article

when returning from the pursuit of a foul, and toss it over into the grandstand.

Thus it happened that, while Elgin was searching vainly for his property, the field was deserted by all save himself and one other man. The latter was Fargo, who had started out with the rest, and then, halfway to the gate, paused, and turned back.

He was within ten feet of the cub twirler before the latter glanced up, giving a slight start as his eyes took in the expression of cold menace on the big backstop's face.

"You common mucker!" rasped the latter fiercely, his big fists clenched as he strode rapidly forward. "If you think you can put a trick like that over me a-purpose, you're a bigger chump than you look."

Elgin took a step backward, his face blanching. "I—didn't do it on purpose," he stammered. "It was—"

"You lie!" snapped Fargo. "Once might have gone, but not the second time. You've got a big thrashing coming, if I can give it to you. Put up your fists, you boob!"

His eyes seemed to blaze, and Elgin, after an involuntary motion to guard himself, dropped his

arms and retreated a few steps. He was trembling and his lips quivered.

"I tell you—I didn't—mean—" he stammered, and then was silent.

"You're a liar!" was the retort. "Ain't you going to put your fists up, or must I make you?"

There was no reply, and, with a swift forward motion, Fargo lunged and brought his open palm against Elgin's cheek with stinging force. The youngster staggered back, straightened, and stood there, head hanging, the picture of terror.

For a moment Fargo stared in silence at the marks his fingers had left on the now crimson cheek. Then he burst into a laugh so full of scorn and contempt that the other winced.

"A quitter!" the big backstop sneered. "A rotten quitter, that's what you are! You haven't got an ounce of grit in your whole hulking carcass. I thought there was something queer about your being such a wonder with your fists. If you had any nerve you could have knocked me endwise—but you haven't. You're yellow straight through. I let you hit me with the ball a-purpose, so's I could see what you were made of. I've found out. Your glove's over in the stand, where I fired it."

Without another word, he turned and strode

toward the gate, leaving Elgin standing as if rooted to the ground. Bert's face turned from red to white, from white to deep, purpling crimson. He gnawed his lips until the blood came, and his eyes were full of bitter shame at the humiliating discovery that he had been caught in the backstop's trap to test his nerve.

CHAPTER XXII

LEFTY'S CHANCE COMES

AL OGAN, the promising cub first baseman and captain of the Yannigans, was not a bad fellow at heart. He had been as disgusted as any of his companions at Locke's apparently inexcusable behavior which had lost them the first game with the regulars, and had joined heart and soul in the cold ignoring of the southpaw twirler from that time forth. But at the end of three or four days, during which he had watched Lefty's work closely, he began to wonder whether he was right or not.

"Maybe he was sick or something that day," he thought to himself late one morning, as he stood watching Lefty pitching to Buck Fargo. "He hasn't been the same chap since. He's certainly got smoke, and he can put the stuff on the pill when he tries."

Presently a bit of friendly joshing between Locke and Fargo, in which Red Pollock and another of the regulars joined, made Ogan still more thoughtful. He kept his eyes open during

the dinner lay-off, and at length he realized that Locke was on friendly terms with almost the entire regular crowd, and actually chummy with the gruff, rough-and-ready backstop.

"I'll be hanged if I know how he's done it," Ogan thought with some slight annoyance. "They don't bother much about the rest of us. I reckon I must have made a mistake. That bunch would never take up with a quitter."

That afternoon he took occasion to speak to Lefty in a careless sort of way which seemed to indicate he had momentarily forgotten the boycott; and when Locke answered him without any signs of pique or soreness, they talked casually for a moment or two.

At the end of the day Manager Brennan called Ogan to him.

"I'm going to try an experiment to-morrow afternoon," he said shortly. "We'll lengthen the game to the full number of innings, and about the first of the seventh I'll put Elgin into the box for the regulars. I want to see what he'll do with that kind of support."

Ogan restrained his surprise, and nodded. "I suppose I'd better not use him early in the game, then?" he said.

"No; take some of the others. He'd better be

fresh when he goes in. The old boys are waking up and beginning to play ball."

This Ogan had observed the day before with some chagrin. Up to that time the cubs had won every game except that first one, and had come to have a pretty good opinion of their ability. Yesterday, however, they had been unaccountably nosed out in the last inning, while to-day their defeat had been even worse.

Apparently there was no reason for it. They were in splendid condition and playing harder than ever. Their opponents did not seem to be exerting themselves a bit more than they had done from the very first. They still contented themselves with letting a hit go as a single when it might have been stretched for two sacks. Time and time again their pitcher let the bases fill, only to pull out of the hole by some wise old trick—the product of hard experience—which prevented the cubs from piling up runs.

Some of the latter did not realize that they were the victims of inside baseball; that the regulars were regaining and perfecting the teamwork which was to count for so much a couple of months later on. But they would learn it soon, for that was the principal reason why they were there.

As Ogan turned away from the manager a sud-

den thought flashed into his brain, and he looked swiftly around. The crowd was streaming toward the gates, intent on a refreshing bath and supper, but Ogan's keen eyes soon singled out Locke in the rear, and in a couple of minutes he had sprinted over to him.

"Want to go in to-morrow?" he asked abruptly.

A faint flush stained Lefty's face, but his voice was perfectly composed as he answered readily:

"I sure do!"

"I'll put you in at the beginning of the seventh. The old man's going to lengthen the game, and wants to run Bert Elgin in to pitch for the regulars. When he does, you can come out for us. We'll talk it over to-morrow."

That was all he said, but as he walked away Lefty felt as if he could have hugged the fellow for giving him this chance. To pitch again for the cubs was enough in itself, but to be pitted against Elgin was more than he had hoped for; and it was with difficulty that he restrained the exuberant joy which welled up within him.

He could scarcely wait until supper was over, so eager was he to tell Janet the good news. She was as pleased as he over it, and they were so busy planning her coming to the field that she quite forgot the little hint she had intended dropping

of how glad she would be if he and Elgin would only make up their differences.

The latter had called again the night before and conducted himself so tactfully that she found him even more pleasant than at first. She could not believe that either he or Lefty could have done anything very dreadful. It seemed rather as if there must have been some misunderstanding to turn them from friends to enemies, and her heart was set on being the means of bringing them together again. It was only after Lefty's departure that she realized her omission and determined to rectify it on the morrow if even the slightest opportunity presented itself.

CHAPTER XXIII

THERE'S MANY A SLIP

IN company with Jean Forsythe, a pretty, breezy Texas girl, Janet reached the baseball park the next afternoon about half past two. They drove down in Jean's runabout, and the little car had no sooner come to a stop on the turf back of first base than Miss Harting forgot everything but her enthusiasm at the sight she beheld.

The whole field seemed filled with brown-skinned, clear-eyed athletes engaged in the usual practice. A number of them were scattered over the diamond in their regular positions, while some one batted to them. At a little distance others were practicing bunting. Back by the grandstand an old pitcher was warming up easily. Farther on a couple of cub twirlers were doing the same thing, with much more snap and speed. The crack of wood meeting leather sounded rhythmically, intermingled with shouts and joshing laughter. Balls curved gracefully into the sunlight. The air was soft and balmy, and full of

the fragrance of growing things. The sky was a brilliant, cloudless blue, and it was springtime.

As the girl's eyes took in the scene, her heart began to beat a little unevenly; her gloved hands lay quietly in her lap, the fingers tightly interlaced.

"It's splendid!" she whispered to herself.

It was deeply interesting to one who could delve beneath the surface, and see a little of what lay under that smiling, sunny crust. Here was a veteran whose name was famous from sea to sea, and to whom baseball was the very breath of life, struggling with every fiber of his being against the inevitable. Perhaps no one else had a suspicion that he was passing his prime, but some day—and that soon—his throwing arm would lose its vigor, or his legs fail to take him down to first in the marvelous way they had done for years. After that the toboggan slide; back to the minors for a while, and then to the scrap heap.

To the seeing mind the field was full of little tragedies like this, which might seem cruel, but which were really inevitable. There is no sentiment in professional baseball. One unvarying law of the Big League is the survival of the fittest. As long as a man can fill a position a little better than any other player the manager can secure—

and that individual is always on the lookout for new material—he stays on the crest of the wave. Once let him slip back a very little, however, and he sinks beneath the surface, never, or at least rarely, to struggle into sight again.

Happily Janet did not realize all of this, though perhaps she sensed intuitively a little of the hopes and fears, the jealousies and heartburnings, which were inevitable in such a gathering. Presently she saw Lefty waving to her, and answered him with a quick smile and nod. A little later, when the game began, he hastened over to the car, bringing Buck Fargo with him; for he was anxious that his friend should meet the two girls.

The big backstop could stay only a moment, but Lefty remained for several innings, enjoying the enthusiasm of the girls over the game. Toward the end of the fourth inning, however, he arose reluctantly from where he had been sitting on the step of the car.

"I'll have to start warming up," he explained. "They're going to put me in with the beginning of the seventh."

They both smilingly urged him to win the game for the cubs, said they would wait for him afterward, and watched him cross the field with a lithe, springy step.

"He's fine, isn't he?" remarked Jean Forsythe enthusiastically. "I like that Mr. Fargo, too. Where's the other one you were telling me about? I wonder he doesn't come over."

Janet had been wondering herself. Quite early in the game she had picked out Bert Elgin over by the grandstand pitching to one of the youngsters who was not playing. It seemed rather odd that he could not spare a moment to run over and see them.

"Oh, he's warming up," she explained carelessly. "He's going in with the regulars at the seventh inning. It'll be awfully exciting to see which does the better."

Lefty talked for a moment or two with Al Ogan, and then, coralling a fellow to catch for him, started to limber up his arm. He felt that he had never been in better form, and the realization inspired him. So far the game was very close, for the Yannigans were having a streak of hitting, of which they took every advantage, so that they were one run to the good at the end of the fourth inning.

If Lefty could help them win the game it would be a triumph, indeed, and would more than atone for his losing the first time.

At the end of the fifth inning the score remained

unchanged. In the last half of the sixth, however, the regulars secured the tying run. A little later Lefty slipped into his sweater, walked to the bench, and sat down. Elgin had stopped warming up a moment or two before, and stood near; but neither paid any attention to the other.

As the inning ended, Lefty saw Jim Brennan beckon to Ogan and engage him in conversation. He seemed to be laying down the law in that sharp, decisive manner of his, and something in the cub captain's face sent a momentary thrill of apprehension through the southpaw.

He thrust it from him, however, and when Ogan finally turned away from the manager and walked slowly in, Lefty moved to meet him.

"Old man changed his plans?" the cub pitcher asked carelessly.

Something, he knew not what, prompted him to put the question. It never really occurred to him that Brennan had changed his mind, but afterward he was more than thankful that the suggestion had come from him.

"Yes!" snapped Ogan. "He wants Redmond to go in. I told him I'd promised you, and Redmond's arm wasn't limbered up, but that didn't make any difference. Sorry, old fellow, but I'll make it up to you another time."

Lefty turned away with a shrug, and tossed his glove up, catching it deftly as it fell. Then he laughed. Ogan could have no idea, of course, how difficult it was to make that laugh sound natural.

"Sure!" Lefty said lightly. "You won't want me at all, then?"

"Not this afternoon. I'll put you in to-morrow, though, if it takes a leg."

He passed on toward the bench, leaving Locke to follow more slowly, his face still indifferent, but his mind full of bitter disappointment. To-morrow! That promise was poor consolation when he had set his heart on pitching to-day. He would never have another chance like this to pit himself against Bert Elgin.

The next instant he raised his head and met Elgin's eyes fixed upon his face with a look of malicious satisfaction. For a fraction of a second Lefty stared. Then he smiled, and, turning, made his way straight toward the runabout containing the two girls.

It had suddenly come to him that he would have to go back and explain to them. He hated the necessity intensely; but, since it had to be done, it might as well be gotten over swiftly.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE UNEXPECTED

THE remainder of the afternoon was one long trial for Lefty Locke. He was under the necessity of keeping up an appearance of light-hearted indifference before the girls, when all the time he simply ached to be out there on the diamond.

He saw Redmond pitching the sort of ball to delight the veterans, who batted him mercilessly. He saw Elgin, backed by the whole strength of the regular team, make a showing such as he had never made before. He saw the cubs mowed down, snowed under, beaten to a frazzle; and all the time he had to laugh and joke and fight down any signs of the bitter disappointment which filled his soul.

Janet, knowing him as she did, realized something of what he must be feeling, and tactfully refrained from any comments on Elgin's pitching. Neither did she tell Lefty how sorry she was at the way things had gone, and for that he was thankful. It seemed as if Janet Harting's pity would have been the last straw.

When the last inning ended, with a score of nine to three in favor of the regulars, she further won his gratitude by suggesting to Jean that they leave the field at once, before the crowd started, and take Lefty with them.

He accepted with alacrity. When they put him down at the hotel, he said good-by to Miss Forsythe, then held out his hand to Janet.

"Thank you," he said in a quiet voice as she took it.

The girl smiled understandingly into his eyes. "Come and see us soon," was all she said, as the car moved away.

Of course, the principal topic of conversation that night was the wonderful exhibition of pitching shown by Elgin. Some of the newspaper men, in particular, were more than enthusiastic, hailing him as the most promising youngster Brennan had discovered, and predicting a bright future for him. The older players had seen too many "infant phenoms" to be in the least impressed; they knew, moreover, how much of his success had been due to their own assistance. The cubs were too downcast over their defeat to think of anything else. Redmond was wearing a grouch, and Locke's stock began to soar when Ogan expressed a belief at the supper table that if the southpaw

had been put in, as he desired, the result would have been quite different.

Lefty missed Jack Stillman and was beginning to wonder where he was when the reporter suddenly issued from the elevator, about eight o'clock, and hurried over.

"Had to get my copy off," he explained. "Say! Have you seen old Oggie?"

"You don't mean Oggie Wilmerding!" Lefty exclaimed incredulously.

"Surest thing you know! The old lobster was here when we got back from the field this afternoon. He's traveling for the Wood's Hoisting Engine Company. Talk about class! Oh, hush!"

Lefty grinned. "Oggie always did have a hankering for lugs," he chuckled. "But he's all right, just the same. Where do you suppose he's gone?"

"Give it up. He said something about seeing a man the first thing in the morning, but perhaps he's hunting him up to-night."

This surmise proved to be correct. About half an hour later a tall, well-groomed, prosperous-looking chap entered the lobby, and was instantly seized by the two Princeton men and mauled after the fashion of college mates who haven't met each other in some time.

He was unfeignedly glad to see Lefty, and when

the first exuberant greetings were ended they settled down in a corner of the lobby to talk over old times.

"You're fat as a pig, Oggie," Lefty remarked, with fond bluntness. "I'd like to have you on the squad for about a month."

Wilmerding waved away the suggestion with horror. "No, thanks! I never took to exercise. I'm very well satisfied as I am. Never did like to see every bone in a fellow's body." He paused an instant, and then chuckled. "But this is the best ever, running across you three old Princeton plugs in a bunch. Where's Elgin? I was talking to him before supper, and I'll be hanged if he isn't a pretty decent chap. Never cared very much for him at college, but he seems to have improved a lot since then."

The silence which followed his remark was eloquent. Wilmerding glanced from one frowning face to the other, and raised his eyebrows.

"What's the matter?" he inquired. "Have I struck a false note?"

"You certainly have if you sized up that cur as decent," Stillman retorted impulsively.

"You don't mean it!" Wilmerding exclaimed. "Why, he seemed very pleasant. What's he done to get you two on his neck?"

"What he did at college was enough to get any self-respecting fellow down on him, let alone the dirty tricks he's tried since then."

The plump chap looked puzzled. "At college?" he repeated. "I don't understand, Jack."

"You will when I tell you that he was the one who stole Bob Ferris' watch and money, and then tried to put the blame on Lefty."

The effect of his words on Wilmerding was extraordinary. The healthy glow faded swiftly from the plump cheeks, leaving them pale and mottled. His jaw dropped, and for an instant he sat staring at the reporter with startled eyes.

"Impossible!" he gasped at last, in a hoarse, trembling voice.

"It's not impossible," Stillman retorted sharply. "The whole thing's as plain as print. Lefty caught him with the goods."

Slowly Wilmerding turned his eyes on Locke. The look in them was that of one who is unable to credit the evidence of his senses.

"It's true," Locke affirmed, wondering curiously what brought that extraordinary expression into the other's face. "I saw the watch in his possession."

Wilmerding dropped his lids and swallowed hard. For a moment or two he sat staring at his

lap, where his plump, well-cared-for hands lay, the fingers tightly interlaced. His mouth was twitching nervously and his face was still pale. At last he raised his head again and glanced at Stillman.

"It isn't possible, Jack," he said unevenly. "You've made a big mistake."

"Don't be a fool, Oggie," the reporter snapped. "There isn't a chance of that. What the deuce do you know about it, anyhow?"

Wilmerding moistened his dry lips. "A great deal," he said slowly. "I—was the—thief, myself."

"You?" exclaimed both men together.

Then Locke laughed oddly. "Jove! That was well done, Oggie," he exclaimed. "We both bit beautifully."

Wilmerding shook his head. His eyes were tortured.

"You're wrong," he said, more clearly. "I'm not fooling; I mean every word I say." He reached out, and gripped the edge of a small table standing beside his chair; somehow, the action seemed to steady him. "It's mighty hard to tell you fellows," he went on slowly. "I thought the whole wretched business had been buried forever. I never expected to hear of it again, but I can't

let you go on thinking what you do about Elgin. As true as I sit here, I stole those things from Ferris. I didn't mean to do it, but I took them just the same. Ever since I was a kid I've been cursed with a sleepwalking habit, and not the ordinary sort, either. When I'm asleep I do things I'd never dream of doing in my right senses. You remember Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde?"

Lefty nodded silently. He was too amazed to speak.

"Well, in a way I'm a Jekyll and Hyde. I've often thought that, sleeping and waking, I have two just such different personalities as those. I'll never forget the awful sensation of finding out the first time that I'd been into somebody else's room and stolen a scarfpin off the bureau. It was at a summer hotel, and I managed to put it back without any one finding out. At college I did the same thing every now and then, but never very much, and always managed to get my loot back undiscovered. I thought I'd done the same thing with Ferris' belongings."

"But, Oggie, this is all rot!" Lefty burst out. "You're worrying yourself over something which is utterly impossible. I tell you I saw Ferris' watch fall out of Bert Elgin's pocket."

"Could you swear to the watch?" Wilmerding asked wearily and without conviction.

"Well, it looked exactly like it."

"Must have been some other watch," Wilmerding returned positively. "Did he ever confess to you that he did the stealing?"

"N-o, I can't say that. In fact, he denied it up and down; but of course he'd do that. I told him unless the things were returned in twenty-four hours I'd go to the dean. They were back on Ferris' bureau the next morning."

Wilmerding nodded. "Naturally, when I put them there myself. In my sleep I had hidden them behind some books on a shelf, and I didn't find them until that night. I tell you fellows, you've made a terrible mistake. I never cared much for Elgin in the old days, and had very little to do with him, but I can't keep still and let any man suffer for my own wrongdoing."

There was no mistaking the deadly earnestness of his tone, and, as he realized what the disclosure meant, Lefty experienced an odd, sinking sensation. Thoroughly upright and straightforward himself, the thought that he had been the means of branding an innocent man as a thief was intolerable to him. Moreover, if Elgin was not

guilty of that theft, what proof had they of his complicity in recent underhanded doings?

With a feeling that the earth was dropping away under his feet, Locke turned toward Stillman. He saw on the reporter's face that same expression of groping blankness which he knew was on his own.

CHAPTER XXV

THE STRUGGLE

LEFTY went to his room rather early that night, but not to bed. The discovery of the terrible mistake he had made regarding Elgin bewildered him at first, and then made him feel as if he wanted to get away by himself to think it all over.

For three years he had felt absolutely certain of Bert Elgin's responsibility for that theft at Princeton. He had felt the scorn and contempt for his college mate which any decent man would naturally feel for a person guilty of what Elgin had done. He had, moreover, from the very first, never hesitated to show those feelings. Now it would seem that he had been totally in the wrong.

It was a most disagreeable discovery. Lefty would have felt glad indeed had there been a chance of believing Wilmerding mistaken, but such a thing was hardly possible. Oggie had never been on friendly terms with Elgin in the old days, so there was no earthly reason to suspect him of making up the story in order to shield the real culprit.

"And, anyway, he couldn't have told it the way he did unless it were true," Locke thought to himself. "It isn't in him to fake a thing so realistically."

Frowning, Lefty moved restlessly about the room, picking up an article here and there and replacing it without a realization of what he was doing. Of course the only proper course for him to follow was to go straight to Elgin and apologize for having misjudged him so greatly, but the thought of doing so was intolerable.

He detested the fellow as much as ever. His suspicion of Elgin's responsibility for the doped beer remained unshaken. Whether the man had stolen or not, did not affect that question.

"I can't do it!" Lefty burst out, at length, a vivid picture of the sneering reception which would greet an apology on his part flashing into his mind. "I detest that man, and I won't give him a chance to crow over me. He'd seize it gleefully."

For a time he deluded himself with the idea that, after all, it wasn't up to him to do anything. The matter had never been made public. With the exception of Ogden Wilmerding, Stillman and Ferris were the only ones who knew anything of it. It had long ago been relegated to the past.

Why should it be dragged out into the light at this late day? He would write to Bob Ferris that very night and put him straight about the matter. That should be enough.

Deep down in his heart Lefty Locke knew that it was not enough. Because he was clean and straight and honorable, he knew that it was up to him to apologize to the man he had so cruelly misjudged, whether he detested him or not. He had been responsible for the stigma resting on Elgin's good name, and that responsibility could not be shirked. Common decency made it imperative for him to acknowledge his mistake.

The decision was not an easy one. In fact, Lefty had never struggled harder against the temptation to take the simple course and let things slide. If he kept silent, the chances were a thousand to one that Elgin would never hear a whisper of Wilmerding's story. The latter was not likely to repeat it to others, and Stillman would certainly keep the matter to himself.

In spite of all these plausible arguments, however, the southpaw knew that there was really only one thing for him to do, much as he hated it; and, having come to that conclusion, he lost no time in ridding himself of the unpleasant duty.

A glance at his watch told him that it was not

yet eleven. Possibly Elgin might still be up, and if the task could be done that night, so much the better.

Stepping out into the corridor, he walked to Elgin's room, noticed the light streaming through the transom, and, without further delay, knocked firmly on the door.

"Come in!" called a voice impatiently.

Elgin, partly undressed, stood in the middle of the room. As his rival entered and closed the door behind him, a look of surprise flashed into his face, followed swiftly by a scowl.

"Well, what in blazes do *you* want?" he snapped with pointed emphasis.

Lefty bit his lips to keep back the retort he longed to utter. He realized that it was going to be even harder than he had expected.

"I've found out that I was wrong about that affair at college, Elgin," he said stiffly. "I came to tell you that I am sorry for having misjudged you."

For an instant Elgin stared at him in silence, the shirt he had just taken off trailing unheeded on the floor. His face was an odd mixture of astonishment and suspicious incredulity.

"You mean—about the Ferris—business?" he asked jerkily.

Locke nodded. "Yes; I was mistaken in thinking you mixed up in it. I've been mistaken for three years."

Elgin's brows came together in a scowl. His lids drooped until they quite hid the expression in his dark eyes.

"Humph!" he grunted. "And when did you find out what an ass you've been making of yourself?"

Lefty flushed, and set his jaws. "I learned the truth to-night," he admitted.

Suddenly Elgin's face relaxed from its rather tense, searching expression, and he laughed harshly.

"And so you're sorry?" he sneered. "That puts you right, I suppose! Without a shred of evidence, you accuse a man of stealing. For three years you blackguard him every chance you get, and then, when you find out the truth, when you wake up to the fact that you've been all kinds of a blackguard, all you can do is to come around whining about being sorry. Bah!"

Lefty drew his breath sharply, his self-control strained almost to the breaking point.

"What more can I do?" he demanded.

Elgin's lips curled. "Oh, nothing—nothing," he sneered. "It's what you should have done

before that gets me. Anybody but a fool would have waited till he could prove it before he called a man a thief. But no; you had to jump in and show how smart you were without giving a thought to the damage you might be doing to a person's character."

Lefty felt that argument would be futile. Besides, he knew that if he stayed any longer he would most certainly blow up and say something he might afterward regret.

"I've told you I'm sorry, and I am," he repeated briefly. "I'll write to Bob Ferris tonight, and put him straight about the matter. I fail to see what more there is to do."

Without further words, he turned abruptly to leave the room. He had almost reached the door when Elgin's sneering voice broke the silence:

"If you think this squares everything between us, you've got another guess coming. I haven't forgotten how you've slandered me, and I never will, even if you should crawl like this every day for the rest of the year."

Lefty whirled, his eyes blazing. "I don't give a rip what you remember or forget!" he retorted sharply. "I apologized because I had to save my self-respect. If you imagine I want to have anything more to do with you than before, get rid of

the notion right away. I don't like you or your methods. You may not be guilty of stealing, but there are some other things fully as rotten that you have done."

Before Elgin could reply the southpaw had jerked the door open, stepped swiftly through, and slammed it behind him.

CHAPTER XXVI

GAINING GROUND

"WHAT the deuce did you go and tell him for?" Jack Stillman demanded pettishly.

"Because I had to," retorted Lefty, with some asperity. He was tired of the whole subject, and desired to forget it. "Don't be a fool, Jack There wasn't anything else to do."

The reporter shrugged his shoulders. There was a note of finality in his friend's voice which he knew better than to disregard.

"Well, all I can say is I'm thankful my conscience isn't so blamed sensitive," he sighed. "He'll be so swelled up there won't be any enduring him. Heaven knows he'll be chesty enough, as it is, when he sees the papers."

"What do you mean, Jack?" Lefty asked curiously.

The reporter scowled. "Same old dope about 'Marvelous Cub Twirler Discovered by Astute Manager,'" he explained sardonically. Stillman had a trick of talking in capitals which made one

fairly see the glaring headlines. "It's the same every spring, only this year there are a lot more kids around than usual who can handle a murder case or robbery a heap better than they can a Big League training season."

Lefty grinned. "Oh, you mean they're giving him a puff on account of yesterday?"

"A puff isn't quite the word. I wish you could have seen some of the rot Temple, of the *Blade,* doped out. He wanted my opinion on it; said he was a bit new to this, you know. I smoothed down the story a little, but I'm dead sure a lot more will rant as bad, or worse. Most of 'em seem to think because the regulars had a landslide it was due to Elgin's pitching. They don't figure out that Redmond's bum work had anything to do with it."

"What's the odds?" Lefty laughed. "You did the same thing last year, didn't you?"

"Not quite. I knew something about baseball to start with, and Johnny Hargreaves tipped me off to a whole lot more."

"Still, Elgin really did do pretty well," Locke remarked slowly. "Anybody must concede that much."

"No better than he has half a dozen times before," the reporter retorted. "That's all I said

in my story, but when I found the way the rest were piling it on, I had to stick in another paragraph. Otherwise I'd be getting a wire from the chief to wake up and take notice."

"After all, I don't believe it amounts to a terrible lot," Lefty said carelessly. "You can't fool Brennan, and his opinion is really the only one that counts."

Nevertheless, as he joined the squad a little later for the morning jog out to the grounds, Lefty could not help feeling a twinge of regretful envy. If he had only been allowed to go on the slab for the cubs the day before, he had a notion that Elgin's performance would not have seemed quite so brilliant. Those laudatory newspaper notices might have had someone else as the object of their praise, and, though he knew how little such plaudits really counted, Lefty was a very human sort of fellow, after all.

According to his promise, Al Ogan put the southpaw in the box that afternoon, and Locke pitched for six innings to such purpose that the game resulted in a tie in spite of the fact that the regulars were in as good a form as ever, and seemed to work a little harder than usual.

From that time on, Locke's companions began to thaw. Once they realized that Lefty's first dis-

astrous exhibition had not been a sample of his usual form, they endeavored to make up for past unpleasantness.

Perhaps their new friendliness was hastened by the newspaper prominence of Bert Elgin. Few men can view unmoved the sudden elevation to fame of a comrade, especially when they feel that this elevation has not been especially merited. Newspapers began to drift in from all the big cities, in which Elgin was heralded as "Brennan's New Find," "A Second Matty," "By Far the Most Promising Recruit of the Season," and so on.

Then followed pictures of the new pitcher in every variety of pose; his style was dissected and analyzed; his progress was noted; for, having launched this boom, the reporters felt under the necessity of pushing it along.

All of these things were not calculated to soothe the spirits of the other cubs, whose existence was noted by scant sentences scattered thinly throughout the sporting columns. They looked askance on Elgin, and the latter, not bearing up well under prosperity, gave them plenty to criticize. He developed an irritatingly jaunty air, which was flaunted at all times. He grew very familiar with most of the newspaper men, and

when on the slab gave decided evidence of mannerisms, which tried the patience and aroused the ire of his fellow players.

Unfortunately for them, his ability to pitch increased rather than lessened, so that their sarcastic utterances rather lost point. A man can make all sorts of a fool of himself off the slab, he may even go through ridiculous posings and posturings while winding up, but when his work is as uniformly good as Bert Elgin's was, criticism is usually superfluous.

The days passed swiftly, with the most of the squad showing an increase in efficiency. They were hitting better, running faster, and throwing more accurately. The regulars were rapidly perfecting their teamwork, and the cubs beginning to learn the importance of something more than the rudiments of "inside" baseball. Some of them took to it like ducks to water, and absorbed intricate secret signals and caught on to the theory of certain movements as if they had been brought up on nothing else from their cradles. These were the men who would push forward to the front ranks. The slower-brained recruits were doomed.

Lefty Locke enjoyed that week more than any similar space of time he could remember. Baseball as a science had always interested him tre-

mendously. He had spent a great deal of time studying out different plays and the reasons for them, but up to now these mental exercises had been generally limited to the more obvious sort, though he did not realize that at the time.

He knew it, however, the moment the Hornets began to pick up and show what they could do when they were in trim; and, though the discovery was something of a blow to his self-esteem, it only goaded him to constant effort and increased mental agility to keep up the pace.

Therefore his work steadily improved. While, perhaps, not so spectacular and dashing as Bert Elgin's, it showed evidence of thought and clear judgment; and very soon it became apparent that he was crowding his rival close, if not actually surpassing him in general ability and resourcefulness.

The one drawback to an otherwise pleasant period was Janet Harting's behavior. She and Lefty had come perilously close to their first quarrel, and all because of his absolute refusal, not alone to make up his differences with Bert Elgin, but to tell her of what those differences consisted.

After her first coolness she had been very nice about it, but somehow Lefty had a feeling that she was not quite the same. She was pleasant and cordial, and went twice to the baseball park to

see him pitch before she and her father left Ashland for the mineral springs at Billings. In spite of all that, however, Lefty sensed the faint rift in their friendship, and it troubled him.

Instinctively he laid it to Elgin, whom he knew visited Miss Harting almost as frequently as he did, and he despised the man more than ever for it. It was one of those cases, however, in which a person can do nothing. Locke simply had to sit still and let events take their course. He worried and fussed a bit at first, but presently his whole mind became so engrossed in the struggle to make good and win out that he ceased to be actively troubled over something which he could not remedy.

After all, if he could only manage to outpitch Elgin on the diamond and prove himself the better player, there was more than a chance of his showing, at the same time, the girl he cared for that he was the better man.

CHAPTER XXVII

A CHANCE TO MAKE GOOD

JACK STILLMAN lolled in the big cushioned chair, his eyes fixed on the backs of two men, carrying suitcases, who were just leaving the hotel in company with half a dozen of their fellow players.

"Back to the hay fields for yours," he murmured sardonically. "Another couple of years, and you may be ready for fast company. This is the beginning of the exodus, Lefty."

For an instant Locke's face was rather serious. Then he smiled faintly.

"You're a stony-hearted ruffian, Jack," he said. "I feel sorry for them. After working hard and getting your hopes away up, it's a beastly disappointment to be told you haven't made good. I suppose you'll think it's a joke when I pack my little bag and go forth into the cold world."

"I'd laugh myself sick," chuckled the newspaper man. "At present, however, I don't see any chance of that coming about. At the risk of giving you a swelled head, I'll tell you, old chap, that you're liable to stick around."

"This from the oracle!" laughed the southpaw. "I'm overwhelmed. But seriously, Jack, if I have improved a little, so has Bert Elgin. Of course, I'd never admit it to any one else, but it's my private opinion that he's the better pitcher."

"I don't agree with you," Stillman returned decidedly. "There's no denying that Elgin's good. He's got speed and fine curves and very fair control, but the combination of all three doesn't always make a first-class pitcher. He's got to pitch with his brain as well as his arm, and he's got to have plenty of nerve, both of which qualities I've noticed in you. I'm curious to see what Elgin will do when he's up against a real team."

"Well, I hope the old man agrees with you," Lefty returned. "It looks to me as if it would be a fight between us two as to which will be kept and which farmed out."

"Why shouldn't he keep you both?" the newspaper man inquired.

"Look at the corking bunch of regulars he has already," Locke protested.

Stillman laughed. "Haven't you got wise yet to the fact that a team can't have too many good twirlers? A Big League season is a whole lot different from the ball you played last summer.

It begins in April, and doesn't end till October. It's fight, fight, fight, week after week, month after month, with the knowledge that a single game, a single inning, sometimes even a single play, may start a slump. It's hard, grilling work, and Brennan knows well that any minute one of his star twirlers may be down and out. He's not running any chances, and you take my word for it that, if you and Elgin don't fall down, he'll keep you both."

"You're a real comfort, Jack," Lefty said. "I'll try not to slump. Wish I knew who was going on to the slab first to-morrow."

"Don't you?" the reporter asked, with sudden interest. "I thought he picked the team this afternoon."

"So he did, all but the battery. Perhaps we'll hear before bedtime. I'd sure like to go in. This will be rather different from the usual practice game."

Stillman nodded emphatically. "You bet your boots! The first game with an outside team is usually an eye-opener. You fellows think you're pretty hot stuff because you've trimmed the regulars a few times, forgetting that the old men take things so easy during training season that you'd hardly know they were working at all. Cy Russell

lets you hit him a dozen times in a game; so does old Pop. I've seen you fan Dutch Siegrist twice running. Do you s'pose you could do that a month from now? Forget it! This game to-morrow is going to be a jolt for some lads, if what I hear about that wild Texas bunch is right. I wonder the old man would consent to a match so early. They usually aren't pulled off till just before we start north."

"Buck told me their manager had sent in a challenge, and the chief didn't feel like turning it down," Lefty remarked. "I s'pose he didn't want to give 'em a chance to crow."

"Very likely. Well, it'll be some fun, anyhow. I understand their pitcher has a reputation for rough-and-ready baseball. I'll be hanged, old man, if I wouldn't be just as well pleased to see Elgin up against that sort of thing if I were you."

"I'll take a chance," Lefty laughed. "I've been up against some tough characters before, and perhaps even this Texas steer can't put much over me."

"That remains to be seen," chuckled Stillman. "The old man's heading this way with Ogan, and from the expression on his face I should say you'd been chosen for the goat."

His surmise proved to be correct.

"You'll start the game to-morrow, Locke," the manager said abruptly, as he halted by Lefty's chair. "I'm told this Schaeffer is a roughneck, so look out for squalls. No matter what he does, don't let him badger you into anything. I'll see to it that he's kept within bounds, but them kind of ball players is so full of tricks you can't catch 'em all. You and Ogan and Fargo better get together to-night and fix up your signals."

After Lefty and the cub captain had departed to hunt up their backstop, Jim Brennan stood for a moment looking at Stillman out of the corner of his eye. The latter was one of the few reporters with the squad that year who knew baseball from the ground up, and the stories he sent home to his paper usually had the manager's entire approval.

"You don't seem much fretted about putting your cubs up against this young sagebrush fellow," the newspaper man remarked presently.

Brennan's eyes twinkled a bit.

"I ain't," he admitted. "Likely they'll get the pants licked off 'em, but that'll do 'em good."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A BAD BEGINNING

AS the Broncs spread out on the field for preliminary practice, their opponents looked them over with undisguised interest. They saw nine husky, sunbrowned fellows, quick, lithe, and snappy in their movements, who scooped up grounders, smothered flies, and lined the ball from one to another without any bungling, hesitation or wooden headwork. They had been playing all winter in the Southern States, and certainly showed the fact in their efficiency and teamwork. They were not really Texans, although posing as such, but, instead, players gathered from various parts of the country.

"Looks like a pretty swift crowd," Al Ogan remarked to Lefty. "If any one should ask me, I'd say we had our work cut out for us."

Locke smiled faintly.

"I reckon we can handle them," he returned. "With Fargo and Pollock in the infield and Hagin at center, I'm not worrying. Each one of those men hit over three hundred last season."

"Exactly," the cub captain said significantly, "but that was last season. Their averages have been pretty punk this spring. I'm not so sure that the team is strengthened a whole lot by running them in at the last minute."

"Personally, I'm mighty glad to have Fargo behind the pan," said Lefty. "Whalen isn't bad, but there's not another backstop in the country who can teach Buck anything. Well, there goes the umpire. It's up to us to show these bucking broncs that they're not the whole shooting match."

Though he spoke confidently, Lefty did not feel quite as nonchalant and undisturbed as he pretended to be.

The Hornets had the field, and it was up to their pitcher to keep the heavy hitters, who would almost certainly head their opponents' batting list, from doing too much damage before he had discovered the strength and weakness of each man, and could govern himself accordingly.

Lefty knew that Fargo would help him out to the best of his ability, but even the experienced backstop could not be counted on to gauge accurately the batting capabilities of men he had never set eyes on before. There was nothing to do but proceed cautiously, sounding the batters as best

he could and relying on his support to take care of the hits.

The first man up was "Cinch" Brown, one of the Texan outfielders, a tall, rangy fellow with a hawklike nose and a pair of keen, dark eyes which seemed to miss nothing. For a second the southpaw hesitated, trying to fathom just what sort of a ball would be "meat" to this Southerner.

Something—intuition, perhaps—gave Lefty the notion that a low, straight one, close to the knees, would be less palatable than any other, and his judgment was strengthened when Fargo crouched behind the pan and made a signal beneath his huge mitt.

Without delay, the southpaw put it over, straight, swift, and cutting the near corner just above the batter's knees—and Brown lashed it out as if he preferred that kind of a ball to any other.

But for the fast fielding of Bill Hagin, the hit would have been good for two cushions. The Big League man, however, got after the ball in splendid style, and made a running, one-handed stop, which prevented the sphere from getting away into the remote distance of center field.

"That's the stuff, Cinch!" came in a harsh voice from a little to the left of the plate. "That's the way to start her off. This kid's easy fruit.

We'll have him going. Smash it out, Bull; you can do it."

There was an odd, unpleasant quality to the voice which made Lefty dislike it intuitively. He cast a swift, curious glance in that direction, and saw, as he had surmised, that it came from the notorious Zack Schaeffer. The Texan twirler stood with his hands on his hips, his powerful legs spread wide apart. When his eyes met Lefty's, a slight sneer curved his full red lips, and, with an unpleasant laugh, he turned to say something to the man near him.

That sort of thing did not bother the southpaw in the least. With an inward determination to settle Schaeffer's hash if he possibly could when the latter came to the bat, he turned his attention to Bull Kenny, the backstop of the Broncs.

The latter looked dangerous as he squared himself at the plate, poising his bat over his shoulder. He was a big, square-jawed, heavily built fellow, and wielded a massive club. Ordinarily Locke would have looked for a bunt, but it was evident from the way he held himself that Kenny had no intention of sacrificing.

He quite ignored a coaxer which Lefty tried him with, and the latter, taking a signal from Fargo, sent over a whistling high inshoot.

Kenny smashed it full and fair, driving it out on a line over the head of Sandy Rollins at second. Then he dug his spikes into the ground, and went flying down the line to first at a speed which showed that hitting was not his only accomplishment.

As before, it was Hagin who raced forward, scooped up the ball on the run, and lined it to second. Brown had taken a fair lead, however, and made the second sack by a hair's breadth, amid a cloud of dust.

"Got 'em going, boys!" yelled Schaeffer. "They're e-easy. Now, Pete, you know what to do."

Nevens, third baseman, evidently did. He was prepared to sacrifice, but Locke kept the ball high so that it was difficult for him to bunt effectively. He was finally forced to hit, and hit he did, though not safely. Nevertheless, he pounded the ball into the diamond, and the two runners advanced, while he was thrown out at first.

"That's the stuff," laughed Schaeffer, as he stepped out with his bat. "Here's where we pull the Hornet's stinger."

He had a peculiar swaggering gait, and carried himself in a manner which showed how thoroughly he appreciated his own ability. Lefty felt an in-

tense desire to fan the fellow, who seemed so cocksure of himself. He was glancing at Fargo, ready to take the signal, when he saw that Schaeffer had crowded up to the plate, his toes well over the box line.

"Get back," Locke said sharply.

"Aw, pitch the ball!" snapped Schaeffer. "What's bitin' you?"

"You're out of your box," declared Lefty. "I'm liable to hit you."

"I'll take a chance, Willie," the Texan retorted offensively. "I ain't seen you pass up anything very dangerous so far."

Nevertheless, at the umpire's command, he edged back grudgingly, but persisted in keeping a bit of his toes over the line.

"The close ones for him," Lefty decided swiftly. "With that reach of his, he can hit anything a foot outside the pan."

He therefore shook his head when Fargo signaled. When the big backstop changed the sign, Lefty, after a glance at the base runners, used a short, swift delivery, and passed up an inshoot, intending to keep the ball close to the knuckles of the batter.

Schaeffer stepped in, and was unable to dodge that shoot. It caught him glancingly, high up on

the body, and made him stagger a bit. Then, growling a few choice epithets, he obeyed the umpire's signal to take his base.

"That man stepped out of his box, Mr. Umpire," Fargo protested. "He wouldn't have been hit if he'd kept his place."

"Aw, cut that out!" snarled Schaeffer, limping in an exaggerated manner. "I was hit a-purpose. Just wait, my young squab," he added out of the corner of his mouth to Lefty. "I'll get *you*."

The umpire refused to reverse his decision.

As he took the ball from Fargo, Lefty's blood was tingling, and his face flushed. He managed to keep a grip on his temper, however. With the bases full and only one out, coolness was at a premium.

CHAPTER XXIX

TAKING A BRACE

"SICKENING!" growled Bert Elgin, sitting on the bench. "But what can you expect with a dub like Locke on the slab?"

Andy Whalen, a little sore at having been left out of the game, nodded absently. Next instant, however, he turned his eyes from the diamond for a second to glance at his companion.

"It isn't altogether his fault, though," he said. "It's no cinch to start in pitching to a perfectly strange lot of batters, and Schaeffer shouldn't have had that base."

"Don't you believe it," snapped Elgin. "If we had a real pitcher—"

"A hit!" Whalen cried. "No, it isn't, either. It's going straight at Burley."

Springing to his feet, he watched the ball soaring out into left field; saw Tom Burley running back to get under it; held his breath as the white sphere dropped swiftly, apparently straight into the fielder's hands; and then sank back on the bench with a groan as the fellow muffed miserably.

"Butterfingers!" he said bitterly. "Why didn't you hold it, you chunk of solid ivory!"

Cinch Brown trotted easily over the plate, and Kenny, covering the ground with tremendous strides, rounded third, and was urged on by the coacher.

Lefty knew the sphere would be relayed. Disappointed by the unexpected muff, it seemed to him as if the ball would never reach the diamond. In reality, Burley, trying to atone for his miserable error, made a swift throw which sent the horsehide straight into the baseman's hands; and Daly, whirling, lined it to the waiting backstop.

"Slide! Slide!" shrieked the spectators.

The advice was unnecessary. Kenny had already launched himself, feet forward, at the plate, and so great was his speed that he almost overreached it. He managed to stop himself with one leg across the rubber just as the ball plunked into Fargo's big mitt, and he was declared safe.

Amid the yell of delight which greeted this decision, Locke turned just in time to see Schaeffer streaking toward third. Apparently he hoped to steal the base in the general excitement.

Lefty shouted warningly to Fargo, but the big backstop, on the job, had already lined the sphere to Terry Daly. The latter caught it astride the

base, but Schaeffer slid feet foremost straight for the sack, and spiked Daly, who dropped the ball.

A chorus of protest arose from the Hornets. Schaeffer got up, slapping the dust from his clothes and volubly voicing his regret at the incident.

"Too bad," he said, as Daly limped off the field. "Accidents will happen, you know. He should have watched out for spikes, anyhow."

As he spoke he caught Locke's eye, and the latter brought his teeth together with a click. He felt sure that the thing had been done with deliberate intention, and, in the fleeting glance he exchanged with the Bronc twirler, a sudden determination filled him to repay the man in the way it would hurt the most.

As he walked slowly back to the slab and stood waiting for Brennan to send out a new man to take Daly's place, a curious calm descended on him. The outfielder's error, coming on the heels of all that went before, had brought Lefty to a state of nervousness which would have been fatal had it continued.

It did not. In a flash it had vanished, leaving him cooler and more composed than he had been at any time since the game began. His face was so quietly indifferent that more than one player,

catching a glimpse of it, frowningly recalled the day he had thrown away that first game to the regulars, and wondered with sinking hearts whether he really was the quitter they had thought him then.

"He's done for," muttered Elgin on the bench. "They've got his goat. He's given away the game in the first inning."

Andy Whalen made no reply. He was watching Lefty keenly, and something in the southpaw's face made him doubt if Elgin was right. There was no question of the sudden change which had come over the pitcher, but whether it was for better or worse seemed a question. With furrowed brow, the cub backstop dropped his chin into his hands, and waited.

Tony Vegaro, the wiry little Mexican shortstop, was at the bat. Schaeffer jumped away from third as Locke pitched, making a fake start for the plate. He stopped short, and retreated almost instantly, but behind him, Monte Harris, the experienced third baseman whom Brennan had put in, streaked to the sack like greased lightning, and was ready for business. Lefty had pitched the ball high to prevent bunting, thus sending it into Fargo's hands in such a way that the backstop

did not have to waste a fraction of a second in lining it to third.

There was a shout of warning from the coacher, but it came too late. Schaeffer flung himself back with outstretched hand, but the ball plunked into Harris' grasp, and he tagged the Texan an instant before the latter's fingers reached the sack.

"Well, what do you think of that?" chuckled the delighted Whalen. "Locke's not so worse, after all."

"He had nothing to do with it," snapped Elgin, concealing his disappointment with an effort.

Schaeffer arose with a fierce scowl, protesting that he had got back to the base safely. When the umpire motioned him toward the bench, he snarled out something about robbery, and moved grudgingly away.

Lefty then proceeded to fan the next batter with swiftness and dispatch; and the Hornets romped in from the field, their spirits beginning to rise at this unexpected finish of the inning.

CHAPTER XXX

THE TRICKY TWIRLER

LEFTY approached the bench in a very dubious state of mind. He was not at all sure that this first inning might not prove his last, and when he saw Ogan hurry up to the manager and say something in a low tone of voice, he fully expected to be told that he might ornament the bench for the remainder of the game.

He tried to gain some idea of what was passing through Brennan's mind by watching his face, but swiftly came to the conclusion that this was hopeless. A mask of carved and painted wood could not have been more impassive. The manager listened to what the cub captain had to say, without moving a muscle of his face. Then he spoke a few rapid sentences, and Ogan turned away with a nod.

"You're up, Buck," he said shortly. "Start us off with a good one, old fellow."

Fargo grinned, sauntered to the plate, and tapped the rubber indolently with his war club. Then he stood back, when Schaeffer, who seemed

to have been unnecessarily slow in starting, requested permission to limber his wing a bit. The reason for this was soon apparent. The first ball fairly made the air smoke, and it cut the plate in half. The next was quite as speedy, but took a sharp hop as it neared the pan. The third was a whizzing curve.

"Showing off," Fargo commented, as if to himself, but in a voice which penetrated to Schaeffer's ears. "I thought that was it."

Then he stepped into the box again, smiling at the Texan twirler in a manner which seemed to aggravate that individual not a little.

With a sneering uptilt at the corners of his mouth, the slab man took Kenny's signal and whipped the ball over with terrific speed. The speed was so great, in fact, that Fargo, in spite of the exhibition he had witnessed a moment before, struck a bit too late.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" shouted Pete Nevens from third. "He didn't know it went by, Zack, old Bronc!"

"Give him another sample," urged the player on first.

"Mebbe you'd like him to toss you one," suggested Kenny. "He's got a nice little lob ball that mebbe you can hit."

Buck Fargo simply smiled that wide smile of his, and waited quietly, his eye on Schaeffer.

"Look out!" shouted the pitcher, as the ball left his fingers the second time.

Fargo dodged instinctively, for the horsehide had started straight at him with burning speed. Only by bending swiftly and holding his bat far over the plate did he escape being hit.

This was one of Schaeffer's little tricks to disturb the nerve of a batsman. With the finest sort of control, he could usually put the ball wherever he desired, and he chose on this occasion to send it as close to Fargo as possible. He shook his head with an air of relief as if he had feared he might hit the backstop, and was glad he had not.

As he straightened up, Fargo made no comment. He still smiled a little, but a close observer would have noticed that his jaw was a bit firmer and his lids slightly more drooping. If Schaeffer had only stopped to think, he might have realized how many, many times this Big League player had faced just such tricky pitchers before, and how perfectly he must have learned how to treat them.

This thought did not come to him, however. Balancing himself on his toes, he took a wide swing of his arm for speed, and lined the ball over. It seemed to start exactly as the last one had, but,

as Fargo quite expected, it took such a sharp shoot that it cut the plate almost in twain.

The big backstop was ready for it. He met it directly over the pan, and sent it whistling above the head of the Texan first baseman, who leaped desperately and in vain for it.

By rapid work, the right fielder got the ball in time to cut the hit down to a single.

Bill Hagin stepped blithely to the pan, and Fargo danced away from first.

The Hornet backstop was a fast man on the paths. To play for Jim Brennan a single season a man had to be that, and Fargo had been three years with the organization. Quick as a cat on his feet, he seemed to know by intuition just when the pitcher meant to deliver the ball to the batsman. For this reason he was able to get under headway in base stealing even before the horsehide left the pitcher's fingers. Although Schaeffer drove him back several times, Fargo got his start on the first ball handed up to Hagin, and was off like a racer. Kenny made a fine throw the length of the diamond, but it was a fraction of a second too slow.

Warned by the disastrous results of the last attempt, Schaeffer made no effort to intimidate the second batter. Hagin had the look of a man who eats speed, and his record quite bore out that

impression. The Texan worked so carefully that he succeeded in getting two strikes on the outfielder, but this seemed simply to put the latter on his mettle. He finally placed his bat against the horsehide with precision and force for a long drive into deep center, which the fielder missed by less than a foot.

Hagin was ready to take second on the throw-in, while Fargo, hitting the high spots, rounded third, and was urged home by the coacher. The ball was sent to second, and Hagin was driven back to the first station.

"Here's where we tie up!" cried Ogan jubilantly. "Here's where we take the lead! Smash her out, Sandy."

Rollins, second baseman, stepped up with the expression of one who has every intention of making connections with the horsehide. Schaeffer had recovered from his momentary annoyance, and was on the job. He pulled the batter with the first ball pitched, which curved beyond Rollins' reach. Then came a foul tip, that counted as a strike, and Sandy flushed a little as he stepped into the box again.

"This time he'll send over a hummer," he thought, taking a fresh grip on his stick.

Schaeffer went through the movements which

seemed to indicate that he was going to whip the ball over with terrific speed, but now, instead of a scorcher, he sent in a ball that seemed to hang and drag in the air, and Rollins struck too soon.

"You're out!" said the umpire.

"That's the goods, Zack!" laughed Kenny, pounding his mitt. "They can't touch you. Put this sorrel-top in cold storage for me."

"Only one down!" cried Fargo. "Show this bunch of panhandlers what you can do when you try, Red."

Pollock stepped briskly to the plate, waited for a ball which looked good to him, and smashed it out for a single.

Hagin, fleet as the wind, had been held at second. When Tom Burley came up, determined to atone for his fielding error, the runner took advantage of the catcher's fumble of the first pitch, pilfering third for all of the backstop's quick recovery and fine throw to the sack.

Burley evidently wanted to bunt, but Schaeffer kept the ball too high, finally forcing the batter into popping a weak infield fly, which was smothered with ease.

"It's up to you, old man," Fargo said, in a low tone, as Lefty passed him. "We've got to tie up the score, anyhow."

As Lefty faced the Texas twirler, the latter's lip curled in that irritating sneer, and he promptly returned to his tactics of trying to get the batter's nerve. Unfortunately for him, Locke did not rattle. He ducked a couple of whizzers sent straight at him, and then, when Schaeffer handed up his famous inshoot, he lashed a sharp grounder into the diamond, which smacked the pitcher squarely on the instep.

There was a roar of pain, followed by a volley of furious language from Schaeffer. Then, recovering himself, he dove after the ball, secured it, and lined it home.

It is probable that he had lost his head for an instant. Had he remembered that two men were out, he might have thrown to first and stopped the score; for he could have caught Lefty. Apparently he seemed to think that the only way to stop it was to put the ball to the plate.

Bill Hagin had not been napping, however. At the first crack of leather meeting wood, he shot like a rocket toward home, slid feet foremost, and Kenny got the ball on him only when his spikes were shining above the platter.

In his rage Schaeffer poured forth a volley of blackguarding language which got the umpire after him, and he might have been put out of the

game had not his backstop hustled out into the diamond and grabbed him by the arm.

"Don't be a fool, Zack!" he snapped. "Keep your trap shut, or you'll be canned. Can you go ahead with the game?"

The twirler, managing to choke down his wrath, limped around the slab a few times, and then toed the rubber again. He was still furious, however, and Al Ogan landed on the first ball for a line-drive over the head of the shortstop. But for a phenomenal catch by Cinch Brown the Hornets might have scored more tallies.

As Lefty came in from the field, he passed close to the disgruntled pitcher, and if looks could kill he would have been finished then and there.

"I'll get you yet, you swelled-headed squirt!" Schaeffer hissed. "Wait, that's all—just wait!"

Locke smiled blandly. "Quit your beefing," he advised. "You're making everybody tired."

CHAPTER XXXI

ONCE TOO OFTEN

THE Hornets were in high spirits as they took the field. To be sure, the score was no more than tied, but the expedition with which those two runs had been made was most encouraging. The sudden and effective brace Locke had taken in the last inning removed, in a measure, the fears some of his teammates had entertained concerning his ability to handle the situation; and, as they scattered to their places on the field, they urged him to "go in and eat 'em up."

Apparently that was just what Lefty meant to do. The first batter seemed unable to connect fairly with any of the balls passed up to him, and he finally hoisted a foul back of the pan, which Fargo smothered without difficulty.

When his successor, Gash Benkard, fanned, it looked as if that half of the inning was going to be a tame one.

In any game it is unwise to make predictions of that sort, however. Games have been won with no men on bases and two out, and this one was still young.

Cinch Brown walked up to the pan, cool, confident, ready to duplicate his performance of the inning previous. He did not find it quite so easy, however. He slashed ineffectively at two balls pitched to him, but finally succeeded in dropping a dopy little Texas leaguer over the infield.

Kenny followed him. He, too, had done well on his first trip to the plate, and hoped to do better now. He declined to nibble at Lefty's teasers, but stood, grimly immovable, waiting for one which suited him. Nevertheless, the southpaw fooled him with two handsome shoots, and then, having a bit of leeway, tried a high, wide one.

Kenny did an unexpected thing. Reaching far over the plate, he caught the ball within an inch of the end of his bat, and sent it into deep right field.

With perfect handling, it would not have been dangerous. "Dolly" Walker had taken many such drives with ease, but perhaps he was too confident. At all events, the ball did not strike his mitt quite squarely, seemed to hesitate an instant, and then trickled unaccountably over the edge of the leather, falling to the turf.

By the time the amazed and discomfited fielder had snatched it up and lined it to first, Kenny was safe on the sack, while Brown, who had appar-

ently forgot that two were "down" already, slid to second just ahead of the flying horsehide.

Schaeffer was exultant. "Got him on the run!" he jeered. "He's a cinch. Get in there, Pete. A little single is all we want. A little safety's the goods! You know where to put it."

Nevens hit into the diamond. The inning would have ended then and there had not Sandy Rollins, at second, fumbled the weak grounder and spent valuable time chasing it around his feet.

Lefty felt a hot rush of anger stir within him. Two such errors are enough to try the temper of any pitcher, especially when he is working his hardest. The inning should have ended minutes before, and now the bases were full, and Zack Schaeffer was swaggering to the pan, a confident grin on his face.

The sight of him cooled Locke as swiftly and completely as it had done once before that day. He shifted the ball in his fingers, taking his time. He hoped to fan this fellow.

Suddenly he pitched, and the ball shot upward with a little jump, rising over the Texan's bat as he struck.

"Strike!" droned the umpire.

"That's the stuff!" cried Ogan from first. "Got him swinging like a garden gate, Lefty."

Schaeffer set his teeth, and the flesh seemed to harden over his jaws. His eyes gleamed.

As before, Lefty took his time. When at length he poised himself on his right foot, flung back his arm, and brought it forward with a whip-like motion, the sphere came humming over with speed which almost made the air smoke.

Schaeffer struck again. This time he missed, as before, but even as he swung he let go his hold on the bat, which went spinning through the air straight at Locke.

"Look out!" cried Fargo.

The southpaw ducked just in time to let the bat pass over him. When he straightened up, he stood for an instant, his eyes fixed on Schaeffer's face with an expression in them which showed a little of the contempt that filled him.

"Beg pardon," mumbled the batter. "Accident."

Lefty knew the Texan lied. To be sure, a man sometimes throws his bat in striking, but almost never straight out into the diamond. Besides, Schaeffer did not have the least appearance of regret, unless it was regret that the stick had missed its mark.

Locke made no comment, however. After the man had recovered his bat, the southpaw stood for

a moment, ball in hand, looking fixedly at him. When he finally pitched, he used a delivery which seemed to promise a swift one, but instead it was the slowest sort of a slow ball. In spite of everything he could do, Schaeffer struck too soon.

As the umpire's voice sounded in his ears, a snarl broke from the Texan's lips. For an instant it seemed almost that he meant to launch his bat again straight at Locke's head. Perhaps he might have done so had it not been for the warning clutch of Gash Benkard's fingers on his shoulder. Then, with a furious motion, he cast the stick to the ground, and walked out to the slab.

"Looks devilish, don't he?" commented Whalen, on the bench. "I wouldn't be surprised if he picked a fight with Locke after the game."

"Wish he would!" growled Bert Elgin.

He had been growing more and more disgruntled as the game progressed. The first ten minutes had filled him with satisfaction at the apparently poor showing made by his rival, but as the latter improved Elgin's temper became more and more unrestrainable.

"You seem to have it in for him," Whalen remarked pointedly. "Strikes me he got out of that hole pretty neat."

"Bah!" retorted Elgin. "What did he get into it for? Any pitcher who knows his business would never let the bases fill with two out, the way he did."

"Wow-wow!" barked the cub backstop. "I s'pose it's his fault that Walker dropped that fly and Sandy muffed a grounder that any kid should have nailed. Whew! Did you see that? That fellow had better be careful. One of these days he'll bean a batter and put him out of business. Sore as a crab, I reckon, at being fanned."

Schaeffer was certainly vicious. Twice Monte Harris had barely escaped balls sent straight at him. He was no quitter, but he had a notion of his own value in the Big League, and did not relish being put out of business by a wild busher who had lost his temper. Having protested to the umpire without avail, he reached for a wide outcurve, popped a weak fly into the diamond, and retired to the bench.

"That gink is going to get his one of these days," he remarked to Brennan. "Why don't you make him behave, Jim?"

The manager made no reply, but, rising to his feet, walked slowly toward the plate. He had not taken half a dozen steps when the accident happened. Dolly Walker had stepped into the box,

and apparently Schaeffer sized him up for easy meat. He promptly launched one of his cannon-ball whistlers at him, and the fielder was either too slow or too obstinate to get out of the way.

There was a sickening thud; a smothered sound, half groan, half cry. Half a dozen men leaped forward to catch the swaying figure, from whose nerveless fingers the bat had slipped. No one was quick enough. It was the startled backstop of the Texans who thrust out his arms instinctively, and then stood helplessly holding the limp body and staring down at the white face resting against his chest protector. All could see that the man was seriously hurt.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SPIKING OF SCHAEFFER

INSTANTLY the whole field was in an uproar. The Hornets, fighting mad, invaded the diamond in a body. Schaeffer, his face white as that of the unconscious man, half turned as if to run. Then he straightened up and faced the music.

"It—wasn't my fault," he stammered. "He was out of his box. He couldn't get away from my inshoot."

"You lie!" said Buck Fargo. "You tried to hit him. You've played that trick once too often, and I'm—going to hand you something!"

He lunged at Schaeffer, who stepped back swiftly and threw up his hands. In an instant the crowd surged around him, shutting out those of his friends who were racing to his assistance. Fargo was on the point of swinging at the Texan's jaw when suddenly the fellow staggered, his face contorted with pain, a yell issued from his bloodless lips.

"I'm spiked!" he cried furiously. "Lemme get my hands on the dog that did it! I'll—"

His eyes met those of Lefty Locke, who stood close beside him on the right, and in a second both arms shot forward, his muscular fingers fastening with a convulsive grip on the southpaw's throat.

"You hound!" he frothed, emphasizing each word by a vicious shake. "You've put me out of business. I can't play for weeks. It's my left—"

At this point Locke recovered from his astonishment, and, with a desperate effort, managed to tear the hands from their choking hold.

"I never touched you," he denied. "I wouldn't—"

Wild with pain and rage, Schaeffer frothed out an insult, and Lefty promptly dealt him an open-hander on the mouth.

Cries of approval greeted the blow. Fargo was trying to get into the mix-up, and others showed their desire to have a hand in the Texan's punishment. The latter's fist shot out, but Locke parried skillfully. Three or four of the visiting team arrived on the run, and a general fight was imminent. The crowd was suddenly thrust aside, and Jim Brennan appeared.

"Stop that!" he roared, grasping Lefty's wrist and stepping between the men. His face was

purple with anger, and his eyes glowed like twin sparks. "What do you think you're doing?"

"He spiked me!" snarled Schaeffer. "The cur spiked me! Look at that foot."

The manager glanced downward, and saw instantly that Schaeffer was not bluffing. Across his left shoe, the gouging marks of spikes were plainly visible. On one of them a faint crimson smear was showing. Brennan frowned and raised his eyes.

"Somebody stepped on you by accident," he said shortly.

"It's a lie!" rasped Schaeffer. "He done it a-purpose. I felt his foot jab down on me. He had it in for me all along."

"Who are you talking about?" Brennan asked.

"Him!" retorted the pitcher, glaring at Locke. "I knew he'd be up to some dirty trick."

Lefty met the manager's searching glance with perfect calm. "I never touched him," he averred emphatically. "I was itching to smash one into him for knocking Dolly out, but spiking isn't my style."

"Humph!" Brennan's keen eyes roved around the circle of faces. "Anybody know anything about this?" he demanded.

There was a chorus of denial, and the manager turned back to Schaeffer.

"I'll look into it," he promised. "I'll stand for anything but dirty business, and any man who'd do a thing like this gets the gaff, I don't care who he is."

He hesitated for an instant, and his jaw squared. "As for you," he went on harshly, his keen eyes boring the Texan's flushed face, "you're rotten. Talk about dirty playing! If I'd had any idea what sort of a cheap roughneck you were, this game would never have started. You can bet your boots I'll take pains to let people know just what you are, and I kind of think you'll have a hard job finding a decent team after this that'll have anything to do with you. See?"

He stood glaring at the Texan, who for once had nothing to say. Presently Brennan's eyes swept the circle again.

"No rough-house!" he snapped shortly. "You boys better beat it back to the hotel. There won't be anything more doing to-day. Dolly's come to and gone along with a couple of the men. This game's finished. Get started now. There's been enough monkey-shines to-day."

Reluctantly, and with many savage glances at Schaeffer, the Hornets obeyed. It came hard to

leave the scoundrel that way, but they knew Brennan meant what he said, and so they gave in.

"Serves him good and right," said Andy Whalen, as he caught up with Elgin. "I'm blamed glad the cur got something to cook him, and I'll be hanged if I blame any fellow for spiking him. Wonder who it was? Didn't you see anything, Bert?"

He looked curiously at Elgin, who shook his head promptly.

"Not a thing," the latter answered. "First I knew anything was wrong was when he yelled he was spiked. I wouldn't wonder if it was an accident, anyhow. With everybody pushing and shoving, somebody likely stepped on him without meaning to."

"Nix!" retorted the cub backstop. "I took a good look at his foot, and, believe me, it wasn't no accident. It was a good hard stamp, done on purpose."

This seemed to be the opinion of those who had been near the Texan when the incident occurred, and much curiosity was expressed as to who could have been the perpetrator of the affair.

The general sentiment was that Schaeffer had been well repaid for his dirty work on the slab; but the more thoughtfully inclined, knowing Jim

Brennan's temperament, wondered what would happen if the manager ever found out who had done the spiking.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE TELEGRAM

THE days passed without the truth coming to light. At first Brennan set about systematically interviewing every man who had been on the field that day, but without avail. Having failed to arrive at the truth in this manner, and other and more important matters coming up to take his time, he seemed to drop the subject. Those who knew him, however, realized that it would always remain tucked away in some corner of his brain until he had finally solved the mystery.

The work of training proceeded rapidly and successfully to its conclusion as the end of March approached. Each afternoon the cubs fought out their losing battle with the regulars on the diamond. The latter were getting into splendid shape, and their opponents had almost forgotten what it felt like to win a game.

Nevertheless, they never gave up, or slackened their efforts, for the net was drawing closer and closer about them day by day. Every now and

then a youngster would drop out of the race. He was not yet ready for the big game, and had either been sold by the manager, farmed out to a minor league, or released unconditionally.

Of the cub pitchers, only two remained, Locke and Elgin. They were both remarkably good in their way, and the other players were divided as to their relative merits. The almost universal conclusion was that Brennan would keep both with the organization unless something unexpected occurred to give him reason for changing his mind.

Lefty worked strenuously without a let-up. He knew his doubtful points almost as well as the manager himself, and strove with all his might to correct them.

Hard as the labor was physically, the southpaw found it anything but disagreeable. He was well liked by most of the regulars and a great many of the cubs. In Buck Fargo he found a real chum whom he came to admire and think better of every day. When the diminishing number of players made a readjustment of rooms at the hotel desirable, Locke accepted with alacrity the big backstop's invitation to come in with him, an arrangement which proved pleasant and satisfactory.

With Bert Elgin and his little group of cronies,

the southpaw had nothing whatever to do. The former had apparently resigned himself to the inevitable, and, since it looked as if both cub pitchers were going to be retained, he seemed to have given up his efforts to injure his rival.

There were just two things which marred Lefty's pleasure and absolute peace of mind. The first was Jim Brennan's attitude of noncommittal impassiveness. Try as he would, the southpaw found it impossible to break down the barrier of reserve between them. No matter how good a showing the cub might make on the field, he never succeeded in eliciting a word of praise from the manager. The latter always gave the young twirler an impression of withholding judgment, a feeling that he was continually searching for something in Locke which he was constantly expecting but had failed to find.

At first Lefty thought it was simply his ordinary manner. Then, when he noticed the manager unbend time after time to others, he reached the conclusion that Brennan had never forgotten the circumstances of the recruit's arrival at training camp, and that he still felt resentment at the manner in which Locke had been, as it were, thrust down his throat.

The explanation of this latter fact had been

absurdly simple. Lefty learned in a roundabout way that Jimmy Toler's letter had traveled to Ashland, Tennessee, and drifted on to the Texan town a couple of days after the busher's arrival. It seemed incredible that any man could harbor such a thing so long, but Brennan was peculiar in many ways, and Lefty could think of no other reason for his conduct.

The other matter which marred his contentment was the fact that Janet, while actually in the same State, was just beyond his reach. It was more tantalizing than if she had remained in that far-away New England town. They corresponded regularly, of course, but letters are always more or less unsatisfactory. Only once had he obtained permission to be away over Sunday, and Brennan's grudging acquiescence to his request made him resolve never to repeat it.

And so the time passed until there remained less than two days more at Ashland. On the twenty-fifth the training quarters would be deserted, and the teams, separating, would commence their homeward march by easy stages and different routes, playing exhibition games with minor-league organizations along the way.

The days had sped with such swiftness that Lefty could scarcely believe the end to be so near

when he arose that morning, and could say that tomorrow they would start. There was no doubting the fact, however, and, what was more, that very afternoon a game had been arranged with one of the most prominent teams of the Southern League. It was the first chance the Hornets had been given to play against outsiders since that brief, disastrous contest with the Broncs, and they were agog with eager anticipation. The Flamingoes were in quite a different class from the bush organization of so-called Texans, and the game was likely to be exceedingly close. Lefty was to start off on the slab, so Brennan had briefly informed him the afternoon before. The youngster wondered whether the manager had any special motive in picking him.

As the squad started for the field after breakfast, Lefty discovered that he had forgotten his glove, and hurried upstairs for it, telling Fargo that he would be along shortly. When he came down he raced through the lobby and almost upset a small boy in uniform who was coming up the steps.

"Say, mister," the latter inquired, as he recovered his balance, "is Tom Locke inside?"

"That's my name," Lefty answered swiftly. "What is it?"

The boy drew a yellow envelope from his pocket, and Locke snatched it with that queer, sinking feeling which an unexpected missive of the sort usually arouses. Tearing it swiftly open, he brought forth the sheet and unfolded it with a single motion.

As his eyes took in the contents at a glance, he drew his breath swiftly, his face turning a shade less brown. The message had been sent from Billings, Texas, that morning. It read:

Father is dying. Come at once. I am all alone.

JANET.

CHAPTER XXXIV

NOTHING ELSE POSSIBLE

"ANY answer?"

Lefty raised his head and stared stupidly at the boy for an instant. Then he came to himself.

"Yes! Give me a pencil—quick!"

Snatching the stub from the other's hand, he turned the message over, placed the paper against the side of the building, and hastily scrawled a few words.

"There!" he exclaimed, thrusting it at the boy; "send that off right away. Don't lose a minute. Here. Keep the change."

It was a silver dollar he handed the boy. Without waiting for thanks, he darted back into the hotel, hastily secured a time-table, and found that there was a train leaving in less than half an hour. It was only after he had reached his room and begun to strip off his baseball togs that he realized he must let Brennan know in some way of what he planned to do.

"There's no 'phone at the park," he muttered,

throwing a shoe into a corner. "I haven't time, anyway."

He tore off his stockings, flung shirt and trousers on the floor, and made a dive for his street clothes.

"Still, they'll all be back here for dinner," he went on aloud. "If I leave a note with Buck, he'll put the old man wise. It's tough! Poor little girl!"

His voice broke just the least bit, but he went on rapidly with his dressing, and in less than ten minutes was ready to go. He gave no thought to the consequences of his leaving in this manner and at this time. Janet had called him for help; he must go to her. Besides, even Brennan, though he migh growl and grumble a little, would understand how impossible it was for him to take any other course.

Finding a sheet of paper, Lefty hastily scrawled a note to Buck, telling his chum where he had gone and why, and asking him to inform the manager. Having folded the paper and written Fargo's name on the outside, he placed it on the middle of the table, where the big backstop could not fail to see it the instant he entered the room.

That finished, he snatched his hat, and darted

down the stairs without waiting for the elevator. At the station he had nearly fifteen minutes to wait, but at last the train pulled in.

Lefty thought that the journey would never end. The train seemed to crawl along at a snail's speed, stopping at every little hamlet by the way. He blamed the doctor at Kingsbridge for having suggested such an impossibly out-of-the-way place as Billings. He kept looking at his watch till he might better have held it in his hand. He bought a paper, and tossed it away unread. He opened a magazine, only to fling it aside impatiently. And all the time the thought of Janet, alone and helpless in this terrible situation, never left his mind.

At Flat Rock Junction he had to change to another road. There was an exasperating wait of three-quarters of an hour, during which he nearly wore a rut in the wooden platform. Another weary, interminable hour followed; but at last, shortly after one, he flung himself off the still-moving train at Billings, and dashed up the main street.

The air was soft and warm and caressing. Trees and shrubs were bursting into leaf; flowers were everywhere. Here and there a bird caroled joyously, and the sound stabbed Lefty like the

thrust of a knife. How could any living thing be joyful when her father lay dying?

Rounding a corner, he scarcely dared look at the house where they had taken lodgings. Perhaps he had come too late. Perhaps it was all over.

He reached the wooden gate and thrust it open. A rustle of skirts sounded on the vine-clad porch, the quick catching of a breath, then a cry of glad surprise:

"Why, Lefty!"

She started up from the rocking-chair, her face pink and her eyes sparkling. A little smile curved the corners of her tender mouth, bringing out the dimple which had always fascinated him.

The man stared up in petrified astonishment. What did it mean? Was he dreaming, or had she gone daft?

"Why, Lefty!" she exclaimed again. "This is splendid! How did you ever manage to get away?"

He swallowed hard and, without knowing what he did, wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"I came," he gasped. "Your—father, Janet?"

A little frown of perplexity came into her forehead.

"Father?" she repeated. "Why, he's all right. The springs are doing him no end of good. He's taking his nap just now. Did you—"

"You didn't send me a telegram this morning, then?" Locke interrupted in a strange voice.

"No, of course not. Why should I? I wrote you last night, but it was only— Lefty! What is it? For goodness sake, tell me what has happened."

The skin over his jaws was hard as marble. The blood had rushed into his face, turning it a dull crimson under the brown, and bringing out a throbbing vein in his temple in bold relief. His lips were pressed tightly together, and the eyes fixed on the girl were not his eyes. They were wide open and almost black, full of cold, consuming wrath. They frightened Janet Harting, and made her step back involuntarily.

"Lefty!" she cried again. "What is it? What makes you look so?"

For an instant he did not answer. He had realized the bitter truth. The telegram was a forgery, sent for the sole and only purpose of getting him out of the way at the very time of all others during his baseball career that he should have been on the job. In a flash an illumination which comes too seldom to a man told him that Brennan's rea-

son for putting him on the slab to-day was in the nature of a final test of his ability. The other game had shown the manager nothing. This would have been the ultimate proof of his fitness to be retained as a member of the squad—and he would not be there to take advantage of the chance.

Swiftly he glanced at his watch, the girl staring anxiously at him the while. He took out a crumpled time-table. The first train left at two-twenty. As he thrust the time-table back into his pocket, his face relaxed a little and a faint smile twisted the corners of his mouth.

"There's been an unfortunate—mistake, Janet," he said quietly. "I'll come up and tell you about it."

He had remembered the one consoling feature of the whole miserable business. Buck would surely find the letter and explain the matter to Brennan. The manager would doubtless be angry, but, after all, it was not as bad as if no word at all had been left.

CHAPTER XXXV

FOR WANT OF A LIE

LOCKE would scarcely have been so self-contained had he known what had taken place at the hotel about the time he was feverishly pacing the platform at Flat Rock Junction.

Through some pretext, Bert Elgin managed to leave the ground a few minutes ahead of the others. He had concealed his nervousness all morning, taking hope from the nonappearance of Lefty on the field, and reveling in Brennan's openly expressed anger at the puzzling occurrence. But now he felt that he must find out something definite.

Arriving at the hotel, he hastened up to the corridor above his own, taking care to use the stairs for the last flight, and made his way to a certain door, which he pushed open without ceremony.

For an instant he stood staring curiously around the disordered room. Then a triumphant smile curved his lips, and his eyes danced maliciously.

"Looks like the kid worked it, all right," he said,

in a low tone. "I was afraid he might slip up on something. What's this?"

Striding over to the table, he picked up the note addressed to Buck Fargo, opening it without hesitation. Having read it hastily through, he smiled again and thrust it into his pocket.

" 'Tell Brennan all about it,' " he quoted, in a jeering voice, " 'and make him understand how I had to go.' I guess we won't tell anybody; it'll be lots more fun to keep 'em guessing till you come back."

He hastened to the door, and stepped out into the hall. "I should say your goose was cooked nice and brown," he muttered, with venomous satisfaction. "I wouldn't give a whole lot for your chances with the Hornets after this little performance."

Happily for Lefty's peace of mind, he guessed nothing of all this. As it was, he had worries enough to keep him company during that maddeningly slow trip back to Ashland. Time and again he went over the situation from the beginning, trying his best to see it from Jim Brennan's point of view, and always he ended by a despairing grasp on that one frail straw: the manager might forgive the desertion as long as the absent man had done his best to let him know about it beforehand.

Stepping off the train shortly after seven, the southpaw went at once to the hotel. The first man he ran into in the lobby was Buck Fargo. The expression on his chum's face made Lefty's heart sink into his boots.

"Where the deuce have you been?" the backstop inquired directly, and with force. "How'd you happen to duck?"

"For Heaven's sake, Buck," the young pitcher appealed fervently, "don't tell me you didn't get my note?"

"If it explained what in thunder made you do such a fool trick as this, I most certainly didn't," Fargo returned.

Locke groaned aloud. "I left it on the table. I told you just what had happened and why I had to rush off. I asked you to explain to the old man—"

Catching a sudden warning in Fargo's eyes, Lefty stopped abruptly and turned slowly around. Brennan stood just behind him, his hands on his hips, an expression on his square, heavy-jowled face which even the big backstop had rarely seen there before.

"Well?" he questioned in an ominous voice, his sharp, deep-set eyes boring into Lefty's brown ones. "Did I hear you say anything about an ex-

planation? Strikes me it's about time something of the sort was dished up."

His voice, cold, hard, and unrelenting, sent a flicker up and down Locke's spine. If the man had only flared out at him, roared, bellowed, it would have been better than this. But that harsh, flinty, absolutely pitiless tone struck a chill to the youngster's heart, and quenched the last spark of hope in him.

"I had—a telegram—this morning," he explained unevenly. "It came just as I was leaving for the field. It was from—a close friend of mine who is at Billings, with her father. She said that her father was dying, and asked me to come at once. She was all alone in a strange place. They knew no one. They had been in the South only a few weeks. I *had* to go."

He hesitated an instant, glancing desperately at Brennan's face. Something in it—the flicker of an eyelash, perhaps, or the faintest possible relaxing of that steely, set expression,—made a tiny spark of hope revive in Lefty's breast.

"Well, go on," growled Brennan.

"There wasn't time to send you word," Locke continued. "I had to make the nine-five train. So I wrote a note to Fargo explaining things, and asked him to tell you about it. I left it on the

table in our room. You must have missed it, Buck, or didn't you go to the room?"

He turned eagerly to his friend, but the latter shook his head.

"There wasn't any note," he said slowly. "I was up there at noon and again to-night. There ain't nothing on the table but a couple of magazines and a lamp. Mebbe it got blown off."

"Perhaps that was it," Lefty agreed. "I wrote it and stuck it up where you'd see it the first thing."

He glanced again at Brennan and met the man's searching gaze unflinchingly. For an instant there was silence as the manager scowled deeply to hide his annoyance.

"You'd ought to have sent word," he snapped. "You knew you was to pitch this afternoon. Why didn't you leave a letter with the clerk, addressed to me?"

"I never thought of that," Lefty apologized. "I was so shaken up and worried and rushed that I couldn't seem to think of anything but making that train."

The spark of hope had been fanned into a little blaze. Brennan was certainly relenting. Everything about him pointed to that. He stared at the cub pitcher from under his bushy eyebrows

for a moment or two as if vainly searching for something more to find fault with.

"You seem to have got back mighty sudden," he said presently, in a tart voice. "Must have taken the first train. Didn't your friend's father die?"

It had come, the question which Lefty had been dreading from the beginning and trying to get away from! For an instant he was tempted—desperately tempted. The manager was plainly influenced in his favor. If he lied and told some plausible story of Mr. Harting's sudden recovery, all would be well, and the matter would probably be dropped. If he told the truth and admitted that no message had ever been sent—

In that second of hesitation, many things flashed through his mind. He was already morally certain that he had Bert Elgin to thank for the trick. He told himself that a lie which would result in foiling the plotter would be no lie at all. The very words of a glib falsehood were on his lips when suddenly he brought his teeth together and threw back his head. He would tell the truth at any cost.

"He was never sick at all," he said swiftly, his face rather pale.

Brennan stared. "Never sick!" he repeated

sharply. "Then what in time did she send the telegram for, I'd like to know?"

Lefty thrust both hands behind his back, gripping the fingers tightly together. His eyes met Brennan's squarely.

"She didn't. She knew nothing about it. It was sent by some one else."

"What for?"

The words came from Brennan's lips like bullets. Suspicion, incredulity, anger, showed in his piercing eyes.

"I don't know," Lefty answered. "It looks as if some one wanted to get me away from the game."

Brennan's laugh was harsh and mirthless. "That's likely, ain't it? That's a clever idea, that is! Where's the telegram? Show it to me."

With leaden heart, Locke remembered what he had done with it. "I haven't—got it," he stammered. "I wrote a message on the back—and gave it to the boy to send."

"Is that so?" sneered the manager. "Did it get to the girl? Did it come while you were there?"

"N-o."

"I thought so. It never went. Just so the other never came."

"But it did come," protested Lefty, though he had a feeling that further words were futile. "The boy handed it to me on the steps. I opened it, and wrote an answer right there. That's the truth."

"Is it?" retorted the manager incredulously. "Just you wait a minute and I'll find out if it is or not."

Turning abruptly, he hurried over to a telephone booth and shut himself in. The instant the manager's back was turned Buck Fargo groaned.

"What the devil did you tell him for?" he said sadly. "I'm afraid you've gone and done for yourself, kid. I have never seen the old man in such a temper since Billy Smith sold a game to the Pinks last spring."

"I wanted to lie," the youngster confessed, "but I simply couldn't, Buck."

"You're awful particular! Who do you s'pose done it, that cur Elgin?"

"I can't think of any one else equal to it," Lefty answered. "It wouldn't be the first miserable trick he's worked."

He broke off as a door slammed and Brennan came striding toward them, his eyes savage and his face the color of a beet.

"I knew it!" he said. "No such message went through the office."

He paused a second, his legs spread wide apart, regarding Lefty with a cold, contemptuous scrutiny.

"I'm through with you!" he burst out, at length. "I can put up with a lot, but I haven't any use for a quitter. I thought you was one when I first saw you, but now I know. You skipped out to-day because you were afraid—nothing else. You pretty near pulled me with that tale of yours—but not quite. You fooled me with that dirty spiking trick, too, but I'm wise now. I'm done with you! Go back to the bushes or the hot place, whichever you prefer!"

He wheeled round and took a few steps across the lobby. Suddenly he turned back.

"Mebbe you're thinking of that fine offer you say was made by the Blue Stockings?" he sneered. "I wouldn't give much for your chances with Jack Kennedy."

Lefty's eyes were blazing. His lips parted for a hot retort, but he seemed to change his mind and choke it down. For an instant he stood absolutely still. Then, slowly, he turned and looked at Fargo.

Neither man spoke.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DROPPED OUT OF SIGHT

THE quickness with which a man can be forgotten is never flattering to his self-esteem. For a full month Lefty Locke had been a member of the Hornets' training camp squad. During all that time he had been well liked by the majority of the older men, and admitted by some to terms of intimacy which are rarely accorded a new recruit. Ever since the strenuous contest with the team of Texas bushers his fellow cubs had also made him one of them in every sense of the word.

Then came the catastrophe. For a brief space his name was in every mouth. The players took sides on the question of Brennan's judgment, some contending that the manager was right, others voicing their continued faith in the disgraced player.

But with the departure of Locke from Ashland, followed swiftly by that of the entire squad, the subject soon palled. There was so much else of vital personal interest that even those who

had championed the unfortunate pitcher's cause became more and more indifferent. Some, even, hearing the cleverly phrased traducements which Bert Elgin never lost a chance to utter regarding his former rival, came to the conclusion that they had been deceived. Jim Brennan rarely made a mistake in sizing up a man. There must, after all, have been a yellow streak in the young pitcher which he successfully concealed from all save the lynx-eyed manager.

So at the end of one short week it is doubtful whether more than three men out of all that number wasted a single thought on the youngster who had, a brief time before, been so popular with them.

Buck Fargo did not forget; he was not built that way. Esteemed as he was among players generally, and adored by the fans, it was, nevertheless, a fact that the big backstop did not usually make friends quickly—that is, what he called real friends, as opposed to pleasant but casual acquaintances.

Somehow, Lefty had attracted him from the first. He liked the way the boy had taken Elgin's part that night at the Palace Theater and stood up unflinchingly against heavy odds. He liked Locke's attitude with his fellow recruits when they

started the boycott against him early in the season. The way the southpaw set out to conquer his faults and improve his playing appealed strongly to Fargo, who had been obliged to labor quite as steadily and strenuously himself before reaching his present enviable position. And when, little by little, he had come to know the youngster better, the Big Leaguer's liking changed to something deeper and more abiding, which made it quite impossible for him to forget.

At first he had been openly angry. He berated Brennan for a blind idiot, and had to be forcibly restrained from punching Elgin's head. Then he wanted Lefty to stay with the crowd on a chance of the manager coming to his senses. He soon saw, however, what an impossible condition of affairs that would bring about, and reluctantly, though with much outward brevity, said good-by.

"You'll write, of course, and let me know how you make out?" he urged. "I ain't much of a hand with the pen, but I'll guarantee to answer every letter right off."

There was a queer expression in Lefty's eyes. He was finding the phases of the situation even more difficult than he had supposed. It was not easy to keep in place the mask of indifference he had assumed the night before.

"I'll write when I make good, Buck," he returned quietly. "There won't be anything to tell you till then."

Argument was futile. His mind was made up. He told no one his plans. It seemed doubtful whether he had made any. He simply said good-by and went his way, leaving behind ripples of discussion and conjecture, which swiftly spread out with ever-lessening volume until, like the departed pitcher, they vanished as if they had never been.

Fargo's one consolation was in Jack Stillman. He found the newspaper man's feelings in perfect accord with his own. There was one difference, however: while the big backstop was ready and eager to do anything in his power to rehabilitate his friend, no way occurred to him; it was Stillman's brain, trained by three years of reporting on a metropolitan newspaper, which hit upon the only possible manner in which that could be done.

"We've got to find the boy who delivered that message," he said tersely as they left the station. "If we can get hold of him and manage to choke the truth out of him, we ought to be able to nail this crooked trick fast to the man who put up the job."

He began working to that end at once. But the time was very short. The two squads—cubs and regulars—were leaving that very afternoon, and the task of finding an unknown boy in the few hours remaining, even though he had been foresighted enough to obtain an accurate description of the fellow from Lefty, was next to impossible.

As it was, Stillman risked a call-down from his editor by staying over a day at Ashland. When he finally left to catch up with the team he was scheduled to accompany North, he had found no clew, but had placed the matter in the hands of a retired member of the San Antonio police force living in the smaller town.

William Bowers was shrewder than the ordinary run of officers. He had been a sergeant for years, and time hung heavily on his hands. He might succeed, and he might not. Stillman felt that the result would be a toss-up. But it was the best he could do.

CHAPTER XXXVII

OPENING THE SEASON

SLOWLY and leisurely the Hornets zigzagged their way northward, pausing here and there to play an exhibition game with some minor-league team, which was usually won by headwork and experience rather than by any extraordinary display of hitting. Even after the regular period of work at the training camp, the big fellows were not wielding the hickory with special effect.

They shaped rapidly into condition, however, and, when the time came to face some of the stronger teams of the minor-league clubs above what was once known as Mason and Dixon's line, they did not disgrace themselves.

Finally, with much rejoicing, the metropolis was reached and the two squads reunited. Jim Brennan, his mind finally made up after weeks of close watching and weighing, proceeded to discard the few remaining recruits who, in his opinion, had shown themselves not quite ripe.

Then, with the squad trimmed down to the num-

ber at which it would remain throughout the season, a week or more of hard, strenuous work ensued. A new infielder had to be broken in by his veteran comrades to the finer intricacies of the game. New signals were devised and perfected. Various pitchers were tried out, one after the other, in a full nine-inning game, and their condition studied by the astute manager. The batting order was decided on. In fact, everything was done which could be done in preparation for that great occasion to which many thousands of enthusiastic fans had been looking forward so ardently—opening day.

It came at last, with its tricky April breezes giving the lie to cloudless skies and brilliant yellow sunshine. There were the same joyous, pushing crowds, the same blaring bands. Some of the men had heard them many, many times before; but even they, though they might dissemble and pretend a careless nonchalance, were conscious, nevertheless, of that indescribable, irresistible thrill which they had always felt, and would continue to feel to the end of time—their time.

Their opponents were the Terriers, an organization of scrappy players who had fairly won their name. The fans got the worth of their money in a snappy game which was not decided

till the ninth inning, and then only by an infielder's error, which let in the single tally made that day.

The second game was lost by the Hornets; but they made up for it by having a streak of hitting in the third contest, and hammering out six runs to their opponents two.

It was during this last game that Brennan tried out his cub pitcher, Bert Elgin, for a couple of innings, and was so pleased with the showing made by the youngster that he determined to put him on the slab two days hence when they met the Blue Stockings for the first time that season.

"I'm going to take a chance with him, and do the unusual thing," the manager confided to Jack Stillman while talking it over afterwards, as he had a way of doing with this particular reporter. "I need a youngster to work now and then until the old men get their wings well oiled up, and I've *got* to take the chance. I'm banking on Elgin."

"Hum!" muttered Stillman.

The manager detected the doubt in Stillman's mind. "You'll have to allow that he's shown form and class for a youngster."

The newspaper man shrugged his shoulders. "I'll admit that, all right," he returned. "Still, that doesn't prove him Cy Russell's equal, for instance."

"Did I say he was? All the same, I wouldn't be surprised if he pushed Cy pretty hard one of these days. What you got against him, anyhow? He's speedy, and he's got a fine change of pace. He's brainy, too, that boy."

Stillman raised his eyebrows. "Well?" he drawled.

"Well, what?" retorted Brennan. "What more do you want than speed, and control, and brains?"

"Sand," the reporter said succinctly.

The manager laughed. "I ain't seen any signs of his lacking grit. He was up against some proposition to-day, too, and he pulled out. I guess I ain't making any mistake trying him out against the Blue Stockings. He's as good as any of Jack Kennedy's string of cripples. He ain't made of the same stuff as that quitter, Locke, I fired in Ashland."

A faint touch of color tinged Stillman's face.

"You're right there, Brennan," he said briefly "There's no comparison between them. Well we'll see how he pans out on Saturday."

As he turned away, a frown wrinkled his smooth forehead. He was thinking of Lefty, and wishing fervently that he might be there. What a chance it would have been! There wasn't a question that, if he had remained with the Hornets, Locke might

have had the opportunity which had been given to Elgin. Stillman knew baseball, and there was no shadowy doubt in his mind as to which of the two was the better man. He felt that Brennan could not have failed to see it, too, if he had not been tricked into turning the southpaw away.

However, that was all over and done with. Not only had Locke been fired, but at this moment Stillman had not the least idea where his friend was. He had heard nothing from him since the day they parted at the Ashland station. The pitcher had promised to write when he made good, but he had not written.

"Maybe he's working for some fourth-rate bush league," Stillman thought regretfully. "I can't say I blame him for not wanting us to know. Maybe he hasn't got any job yet. I'd give a farm to get that crook Elgin where I want him, and show Brennan what a mistake he's made."

Unfortunately the ex-sergeant at Ashland had, so far, failed signally in finding a single clew to the mystery, and Stillman was beginning to grow discouraged. It looked as if Bert Elgin had won out, in spite of the fact that truth and honor and decency were all opposed to him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE TWO MANAGERS

A DOOR opened, and a tall, thin man, with a slight stoop, stood on the threshold, looking down upon the manager of the Hornets. His dark eyes glimmered and a smile stretched his wide mouth, which transformed the almost homely face into one that was positively good-looking.

At the sight of him, Jim Brennan sprang up from his desk so hurriedly that he came near upsetting the revolving chair, and leaped toward the newcomer with hand outstretched.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Put it there, Ken, old boy! It sure does a man good to see your smiling face again. How's things?"

"Fine!" returned Kennedy, of the Blue Stockings, gripping the other's hand. "Couldn't be better, in fact. You're looking blooming yourself, Jim. Taken on a few pounds over the winter, haven't you?"

"A few, maybe. I can stand it, though. Once fat, a little more never cuts any ice. Sit down and

rest your face and hands. I see you've had a clean sweep so far."

Kennedy dropped into a chair beside the desk, crossing one long leg over the other. Though antagonists on the diamond, in private life the two men were the best of friends, and always enjoyed talking things over in this way whenever they met.

"We have," rejoined the taller man when Brennan had settled himself at the desk again, "won four games straight, which isn't so bad to start in the season with."

Brennan grinned. "Well, you're up against a team of real ball players to-day, Ken," he chuckled. "Doing some stunts with a bunch of has-beens on the firing line. I've a sort of hunch that we're going to break up that streak of luck."

"I should worry," smiled Kennedy. "I've never seen the men in better shape. We're going to make 'em all take our dust this year."

"Humph!" grunted Brennan. "That remains to be seen. Who you going to dish up for us to knock the stuffing out of—Pete Grist?"

"Nope. I've got a man I had farmed out to a Southern independent team, with a string attached. He turned out to be a regular bush wonder, so I pulled the string the other day, and yanked him in

here to try him out on you. It's always best to give a youngster something easy to start with."

Brennan laughed. "Say, Ken, that's sort of funny, though. I was counting on putting in a dark horse myself. He's a kid I picked up last fall. I'll guarantee right now that he'll lick the pants off your Southern wonder."

"If it wasn't so much like highway robbery, I'd make you back your talk up with cash," Kennedy returned calmly. "As it is, I'll have to content myself with a sight of your face after the game."

Brennan was scoffing at Kennedy's folly in imagining he could take a fall out of the Hornets with a raw busher on the slab, when suddenly he stopped abruptly, frowning.

"Say!" he burst out the next moment. "Did a fellow named Locke come around for a job within the last month? I meant to drop you a line about him, but I'll be hanged if I didn't forget it. He's a southpaw, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he applied under another name."

Kennedy shook his head. "No, he didn't change his name. He couldn't, seeing as I knew about him before. He blew in the day before we broke camp in Georgia; but I was a bit wary when I found out you'd dropped him that way. He didn't stay long."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't get stuck with him," Brennan exclaimed emphatically. "I'd sort of felt it was my fault if you had, seeing as I forgot to put you wise about him. Believe me, Ken, he isn't any use, but he shows up good at first. It took me the whole training season to get on to the fact that he's yellow right through—one of the worst quitters I ever saw. We're both well rid of him. Say, look at the time! I didn't think it was so late."

He sprang up as he spoke, and slammed his desk down. Kennedy arose more leisurely, and together they left the office for the dressing rooms of their respective teams.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE MEETING IN THE GRANDSTAND

THREE games had been insufficient to take the edge from the enthusiasm of the fans, intoxicated with the wine of spring and bubbling with the joy of looking down once more upon that diamond after their long winter deprivation.

Moreover, in point of strength there was no comparison between the Blue Stockings and the Terriers. To be sure, the latter had made a hot start this year, but the former were old rivals of the Hornets, who, year after year, had pushed them close in that desperate fight for the pennant, and last season had beaten them out by a hair. Consequently this first struggle between them drew almost as many spectators as the game which had opened the season a week before.

The day was perfect. A sweep of blue sky, clear save for a few wispy clouds, was overhead. A trifling little breeze lurked here and there at sharp turns or corners, but it blew from the south, and held no chill undercurrent which was not offset by the warm, grateful sunshine.

The fans rejoiced as they sped toward the grounds by every possible car line and conveyance. Those of them who had witnessed the opening game told one another how much better this one was likely to be.

Long before one o'clock great throngs had assembled at the gates, and when those gates were finally opened there was a wild rush past ticket-takers into the clattering emptiness of the vast stands. Down over the tiers of seats they stumbled, struggling for the desirable front rows. Hats were smashed here and there, and there were occasional wordy altercations; but, as a rule, laughter and joshing and good-natured horseplay prevailed.

By two o'clock, the bleachers were crowded, and the more expensive seats were filling fast. Half an hour later it looked as if every place, save in the reserved sections, was occupied; and still the crowd streamed in like a swollen river.

Tramp, tramp, tramp! Regular, rhythmic, the sound of their marching was like the thunder of a great army. Ogden Wilmerding, hurrying toward a coveted place in the lower stand, felt the thrill which that sound brings to the heart of every fan who has hibernated reluctantly for six long months.

"Nothing like it," he chuckled as he was swept along. "This looks a lot like opening day," he went on, peering over the top of the last row of seats. "I'm not so sorry as I was over getting back too late for that."

He soon saw that it would be impossible to get the seat he wanted. The section directly behind the plate was filled in solid. For a moment he stood there peering down at the reporters' bench in a vain hope that some one he knew—Jack Stillman, perhaps—might find room for him there. He saw places enough; but neither Stillman nor any other of his newspaper friends had yet appeared.

"Hang it all!" he muttered. "Why didn't I start half an hour earlier, or wire from Boston for a box?"

"Because you're the same lazy old slob you were three years ago," chuckled a voice in his ear.

Wilmerding whirled, his eyes popping, stared for a second in speechless amazement at the young man against whose shoulder he had been almost leaning. Then he fell upon him with a roar of delight.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he gurgled. "Snow, you old cut-up, where in time have you been? I thought you'd croaked years ago. Shove along

and give me a chance. You're spread over two seats, easy."

Snowden Pell obeyed laughingly. The man beside him, taking in the situation with a good-natured grin, likewise moved, and Wilmerding was accommodated with a seat.

"It takes a lot to put me out of business," Pell chuckled when his friend had settled beside him. "I'm very far from being a dead one, as they'll tell you out in Seattle."

"But why didn't you write and let somebody know how you were getting on? Last I heard, your father failed, or something, and you slipped out of Princeton right in the middle of the spring term without saying a word to anybody. To this day I never knew how much of the tale was truth and how much fiction."

"It was pretty much all truth," Pell returned quickly. "My governor's partner got playing the Wall Street game, and smashed the business to bits. There wasn't enough left even for me to keep on and finish the term, and when I found out how bad things were I just faded quietly away. I didn't want any of the boys to be sorry for me, or to think that I was an object of charity, the way—"

"Rot!" broke in the stout chap emphatically. "You make me sick! At least, you might have

said a word to your old friends. Look over in the bleachers. They're firing one of those sandwich-chewing-gum-cigar baskets at each other. Next thing you know they'll be tossing some kid around."

For a moment they watched the wicker basket rise and fall as the bleacherites employed their time in playing a sort of handball with it. Here and there in a distant part of the stand men were throwing paper at one another, sporting with the inevitable straw hat which some one always seems to bring along for the purpose, and otherwise enjoying themselves.

Presently Wilmerding turned again to his friend.

"Well, where'd you go?" he asked. "What you been doing ever since?"

"I had a job offered me in Seattle, which I snapped up. It was a good opening for me, and I'm certainly glad I got with that particular concern, even if I had to borrow money to get out there. I had the first letter from them the very day I left Princeton; and, by Jove, Oggie!"—he threw back his head and laughed at the sudden recollection—"you came mighty near being the goat."

"What do you mean?" the stout fellow inquired

tartly. "You didn't touch me, that I remember. Of course, I'd have turned you down"—his tone was one of heavy sarcasm—"but at least I'd liked to have had the chance."

"You were the first person I thought of when I realized I'd have to sting somebody," Pell laughed. "Trouble was, I couldn't locate you. Went to your room, and stayed a deuce of a while in hopes you'd come in. Then, when I couldn't wait any longer, I hunted up Victor Wood, and he did the business."

He hesitated an instant, and then went on swiftly, a note of sudden curiosity in his voice:

"That reminds me of something I've always wanted to ask you. What sort of a game did you and Bert Elgin have together about that time?"

Wilmerding stared. "Game?" he repeated blankly. "Bert Elgin? I don't get you, Snow. Elucidate."

"Well, I thought it was a joke of some kind," Pell returned. "Only it seemed funny that all of a sudden you should be as chummy as that with Elgin. While I was waiting for you, I strolled into your bedroom to brush my hair. I was standing before the bureau when I heard the outside door open. Thought it was you, of course, until some one called out your name. I didn't feel in the

mood for gassing with any one else, so I said nothing and slipped back to one side of the door.

"To make a long story short, I heard the fellow moving around the sitting room, and pretty soon I happened to catch sight of him in the dressing-table mirror. It was Bert Elgin, and he was heading for the bookshelves in the corner."

Wilmerding gave a slight start, the color flaming into his face.

"Go on," he urged, as his friend, glancing at him, paused in his narration. "What—happened?"

"He took something out of his pocket and dropped it behind the books," Pell continued. "I didn't see what it was; but as it fell there was a clink that sounded like metal—a chain or—— Great Scott! What is it, Oggie? What's the matter with you?"

The color had vanished from Wilmerding's face, and he was staring at his companion with a strained, incredulous expression in his eyes which testified to the emotion he was undergoing.

"What—books—were they?" he gasped at length, in a hoarse voice.

"The books he put the stuff behind, you mean?" queried Pell. "I don't remember, but I think it was the second shelf from the top. I know they

were over on the extreme right-hand end of the case."

Wilmerding drew his breath with a whistling sound. For an instant he sat silent. Then he moved his hand unconsciously, and caught Pell's arm in a grip which made the man wince.

"What day was that, Snow?" he breathed.

"The twenty-sixth of May," was the quick response. "I don't think I'll ever forget that date. It was about three in the afternoon. But what in thunder was it all about, Oggie? I never supposed it was anything but a joke. Can't you put a fellow wise?"

The big man at his side did not answer. He was staring out across the diamond toward the bleachers, black with their crowds of restless fans. He saw nothing, heard nothing. He could not speak for the joy which filled his soul as a realization of the truth came to him at last.

He was not a thief!

For years he had been so absolutely convinced that it was he who had—unconsciously, perhaps, but still none the less certainly—stolen those things from Bob Ferris' rooms, that Pell's story struck him as almost incredible.

There could be no mistake, however. The details fitted too perfectly to admit of a coincidence.

Lefty had been right, it was Elgin who was the thief, not he. And Elgin it was who had done a thing which would have been impossible in Wilmerding, waking or sleeping; he had deliberately stolen, and as deliberately planned to throw the blame upon an innocent man.

Sudden, furious anger flamed up within the Princeton man. He felt as if he must search out that contemptible coward and give him a little of what was coming to him. He half rose from the bench, his face livid; and then he realized that all around him a wild uproar had arisen. Men yelled and cheered themselves purple; they stamped and shouted and waved their hats.

Pell's hand caught Wilmerding by the arm and dragged him down, but not before the angry man had caught a glimpse of the line of athletes in their immaculate uniforms, leaving the shadow of the distant bleachers and trotting briskly into the brilliant April sunshine on the field.

CHAPTER XL

THE SURPRISE

AMID the roaring of the crowd, the Hornets made their way across the diamond. Brennan was in the lead, with Cy Russell beside him; and, at moments when the scurrying phalanx of photographers permitted, the manager talked to his star pitcher in low tones.

"You'd better keep your arm limbered, Cy," he said. "I shall send you in if they get to Elgin. The gink Kennedy's going to open with ought to be soft for us."

"Who is he?" Russell asked curiously.

The manager paused until a camera had been snapped and the reporter had retreated to a little distance.

"Some busher," he explained. "Ken seems to think he's a find, but I've seen them kind before. Grist'll take his place when we bat him out, and we want to get away to a flying start."

As they neared the bench, the fans gave a yell for Russell, and several newspaper men came up to inquire perfunctorily whether it was not true

that he was to go on the slab first for the Hornets.

"You boys'll find that out in time," Brennan returned evasively. "Don't you know that I ain't the kind to give out that information before the announcer? Chase yourselves."

He turned to Bert Elgin, who was standing not far away, looking as cool and nonchalant as if he had never played on anything but a Big League team, and proceeded to give him a few last bits of advice.

While this was going on, another cheer went up from the stands as the Blue Stockings' contingent appeared and rapidly crossed the field.

Brennan's back was towards them, and he was consequently surprised to see Elgin give a sudden start and stare fixedly at the approaching squad.

For an instant Elgin's face remained fixed; then into his eyes there leaped an expression of such utter astonishment, mingled with hate, that the manager's words ceased abruptly, and he grasped the young pitcher by one arm.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked sharply.

Elgin swallowed hard, and his face, which had turned slightly pale, now flamed crimson.

"Look there!" he said hoarsely.

Brennan whirled and stared at the approaching players. For a second he saw only the line of blue-stockinged men, headed by Jack Kennedy. Then, as his eyes focused on the tall, lithe, graceful figure walking beside Spider Grant, the famous first baseman of the rival organization, his jaw dropped.

"I'll—be—hanged!" he gasped. "Tom Locke!"

It was Lefty, browner than he had been a month ago, and with, if possible, an easier swing in his carriage. His face glowed with health. His teeth gleamed as he smiled at some sally of his companion. He showed no trace of the awkwardness or embarrassment which one might naturally expect at his first encounter with the team from which he had been dropped in such disgrace. True, his brown eyes flashed a single questioning glance at one man among the Hornets, but it was seen by no one save that man, who leaped forward as if propelled from a catapult.

"Lefty, you old lobster!" he cried, as he gripped both of the southpaw's hands in his. "What you deserve is a good larruping; and I'd like to hand it to you right now."

There was an odd expression on Lefty's face as he grasped Fargo's big fists firmly. For an instant he did not speak.

"I didn't make good, Buck—honest I didn't," he said at length in a low tone.

"G'wan!" retorted the backstop. "What you giving us? Ain't you with the Blue Stockings?"

"Yes; but I've been with them only two days. Kennedy farmed me with the Badgers, down South. I never knew what he thought of me, or what he meant to do, till I got a wire telling me to come on at once. I had a streak of great luck down there, and I suppose—"

"Luck be hanged!" interrupted Fargo forcibly. "You made good, just as you would have with us if that miserable sneak— Say! You ain't going into the game to-day?"

Locke hesitated an instant, and then nodded. "Yes," he said, lowering his voice. "Kennedy's going to give me a chance."

Fargo grinned. "Glory be! The old man's going to put Elgin on the slab. You'll be up against him at last; and, if you don't make him look like a rotten lemon, it's all up between you and me."

For a second Locke stood looking at his friend, with sparkling eyes and swiftly reddening cheeks. His face took on a look of firm, indomitable purpose. Unconsciously both brown, muscular hands, hanging straight down at his sides, clenched themselves until the knuckles showed white through the

skin. Then he pulled himself together with an effort, and laughed.

"You're a hot ball player to talk like that," he joshed. "You sure don't want your own pitcher to fall down, do you?"

"I'm not keen about losing the game," Fargo returned. "But I shouldn't shed tears if Elgin was hammered out of the box."

Up on the reporters' bench a telegraph instrument had suddenly ceased clicking, and a rush and bustle followed as a slim fellow in a long tan coat and rakish soft hat pushed hurriedly past his fellow reporters.

He paid no heed to their comments and questions, but, reaching one of the gates, thrust it open, and hastened out upon the field. A moment later he, too, was shaking hands with Lefty and upbraiding him in unmeasured terms.

Presently several more of the Hornets' players strolled up and joined the little group about the young twirler. The fans, realizing that something was doing which they did not understand, gave vent to caustic comments and various sarcastic remarks about the folly of delaying the game.

Brennan, still scowling, called peremptorily to his men, and sent them loping on to the diamond for preliminary practice. Locke took a posi-

tion over to one side, and commenced warming up. The field was soon a picture of animated motion.

"What kind of a game is this you're giving me, Ken?" Brennan inquired tartly as Kennedy strolled up a moment later. "You told me you'd thrown down that fellow Locke when he applied for a job."

"No, I didn't, Jim," retorted the Blue Stockings' manager mildly, a faint twinkle in his dark eyes. "I said he didn't stay with me long. He didn't. I let the Badgers have him. Hadn't time to bother with him myself, so I shipped him to them for a try-out, with one of my scouts to keep an eye on him. The boy won every game he pitched, and did such brainy work that I pulled him in. The reason I didn't tell you his name was because he asked me this morning not to say anything about him to any of your crowd."

"Humph!" growled Brennan. "Thought he was goin' to jar me, I suppose. So this is the bush wonder you were telling me about. I wish you joy with that quitter. Better have an anchor ready to hitch to him about the third inning. You'll need it."

"We'll see if you're right," smiled Kennedy.

Brennan turned away, grumbling incoherently. Evidently he was still feeling somewhat sore.

The gingery fielding practice continued to the delight of the spectators, who applauded every snappy throw or pretty catch.

When the Blue Stockings took their places on the diamond their efforts were cheered almost as much as had been those of the home team. The great crowd seemed to be in a jovial, good-natured mood; though, when the practice was over and the batteries for the day announced, there was a concerted growl at the discovery that two unknowns were to take the slab instead of the old favorites.

Nevertheless, there was no great amount of kicking. The game was about to begin; that was the main thing. Besides, it would be rather interesting to see which of these cubs proved himself the better man.

The photographers were shooed away and the field cleared. The Hornets pranced out upon the diamond like a lot of colts, eager for the fray. Elgin got a cheer all to himself for the cool, confident, and business-like way in which he took the slab. The umpires got into position, one of them tossing out a clean, new ball to the young pitcher. The fans yelled again, just for the sake of letting off steam.

Then came a tense, breathless hush as they waited for the first ball to be pitched.

CHAPTER XLI

THE BEGINNING OF THE GAME

RUFE HYLAND, the visitors' right fielder and one of their crack hitters, stood at the pan, calm and smiling, swinging his stick with a short, gentle motion, which seemed to denote tense muscles and a brain alert and ready to take advantage of any pitched ball that should nick the platter.

In spite of his seeming coolness, Bert Elgin had really never been more nervous in his life. He took his time, even after Fargo had given the signal, and, as he dug away the soil near the pitcher's rubber with his copper toe, he heard his teammates coaching behind him.

He was heartened by the sound of their friendly voices; but, nevertheless, the straight, low one he sent over seemed to lack his usual cannon-ball speed. Hyland lashed it out in a manner which sent the pitcher's heart down into his boots. For an instant he thought it a two-bagger, at least. Then, as he whirled round, he saw that Dutch Siegrist, sprinting at full speed, had scooped it right off the blades of grass.

The superb catch brought a yell of delight from the Hornets' rooters, and seemed to brace Elgin amazingly. He took a long breath, and his nerves ceased to flutter as he surveyed the next batter. He felt a new confidence in himself in the realization that the team was behind him, ready to back him up with their wonderfully perfect organization. He lost instantly that sense of isolation he had been conscious of at first—the feeling that the entire weight and responsibility of the game lay on his shoulders. The boys were there, ready to cover any blunder or mistake he might make; and, though this did not bring about laxness in his pitching, it was infinitely consoling.

Again he took the signal from the big backstop, but this time the ball he put over had burning speed, and a little jump to it which completely fooled Pink Dalton, the Blue Stockings' second baseman.

It was followed by an incurve that cut the corner of the plate.

Dalton fouled back of the pan.

Then came a couple of teasers which the batter ignored; and finally, with two and two, the Blue Stockings' man hoisted a high fly into left field, which was easily caught by the guardian of that pasture.

The roaring approval of the crowd caused the blood to tingle in Elgin's veins. Before the end of the game he meant to have them shouting his name as loudly as they had yelled for Russell, or Pop Jennings, or any other of the old favorites, on the opening day. It wasn't such a hard matter, after all, to pitch in a Big League contest.

By carefully following Fargo's signals, he struck out Brock, the visitors' center fielder, and then walked toward the bench with a little, unconscious swagger. One or two of his fellow players told him how well he'd done. Brennan, even, added his approval.

Elgin fancied that he had made a very good start, indeed, and that there wasn't a doubt of his form improving as the game progressed. He was quite satisfied with his cleverness in letting only three batters oppose him. He gave no thought to how much the man behind the pan had contributed to this result. Neither he nor any one else had the least conception of the fight which had gone on in Buck Fargo's mind between loyalty to his team and the contempt and hatred he felt for the pitcher his brains and experience were helping so greatly.

The caustic comment and jeering criticism which had greeted Elgin's appearance were as nothing to the disparaging chorus that arose when Lefty

walked out into the diamond. Baseball fans are extremely partizan, and the supporters of the Hornets outnumbered those of their opponents ten to one.

The southpaw could not help being a bit affected by the unflattering remarks hurled at him from the bleachers and grandstand, even though he knew how little such things counted and how fickle the average rooter is. He felt, too, and rather painfully, the lack of encouragement from his own team. He knew he was not one of them. They had shown him that only too plainly. With the exception of one or two, they had made him perfectly aware of the fact that they regarded him as a man who had yet to win his spurs, and on whom the honor of opening the first game with the Hornets had devolved more by accident, or through a whim of their manager, than from any real worth or proven merit. Their silence as he toed the slab was in vivid contrast to the behavior of their opponents in the first half of the inning.

It made him set his teeth and resolve desperately to make good; to show them that he had something in him; to vindicate Jack Kennedy's judgment; incidentally, to prove to the latter how grateful he was for having been given this chance.

For a second he waited for his catcher's signal,

but none came. Dirk Nelson seemed to be occupied in settling down behind the pan and making sure that his mitt was in place. Lefty wondered whether the backstop's well-known chumminess with Pete Grist, the popular Blue Stockings' twirler, had anything to do with this unusual state of absent-mindedness. Grist had shown unmistakable signs of ill humor on discovering that he was not to start on the slab to-day.

There was but a momentary hesitation. Bill Hagin was at bat, and Lefty had played too many practice games against the capable outfielder not to know pretty well his strong and weak points. Unfortunately the latter were few. The southpaw was satisfied, however, when he finally got Nelson's belated signal. A slow floater was what he handed up for a starter.

Hagin, doting on speed, could not restrain himself, and struck too soon. Lefty then tried a curve. The batter swung at it, making connections and bumping a slow grounder towards short.

Eddie Lewis made the mistake of waiting for the ball, and was then forced to throw hastily in order to get it across the diamond in time. That hasty throw was wide, and Spider Grant had to leap off the cushion. Hagin was safe because of bad judgment and an error.

The crowd cheered, and urged Dutch Siegrist to carry on the good work.

The first baseman of the Hornets took no chances. In spite of Lefty's efforts to prevent it, he managed to lay down a bunt which corkscrewed along the base line, ever threatening to roll foul, but in the end coming to rest a couple of inches on the right side. Locke snatched it up and lined it to Grant, but the delay had made it possible for the German to reach the sack in safety.

Jim Brennan smiled significantly. He had watched Locke closely and expectantly, waiting for signs of the yellow streak to show. With two men on bases and none out, it looked very much as if the southpaw's first inning would be his last.

"We've got him going," the manager of the Hornets muttered jubilantly. "Ken'll have to yank him sudden. I reckon he'll have more faith in my judgment after this."

When Nolan, his left fielder, presently sent a foul back of first and was put out by Grant's wonderful sprinting and equally amazing catch, Brennan's conviction was in no wise altered. This was pure luck, helped on by the skill of the first baseman, and reflected no credit on Locke.

Buck Fargo was advancing to the plate, too, which boded well for the Hornets.

"You know what to do, Buck," the manager said, in a low tone, as the backstop passed him. "We've got this green portsider on the run already."

It was a curious situation. The two men facing each other were friends. Fargo's sympathy for the young pitcher was such that he wanted him to make good almost more than he desired a victory for his own team. The big backstop could help very materially, if he wished, without any risk to himself; and he realized that this was a crucial moment in the inning when a hit might mean a run, while an out would go far toward killing the Hornet's chances for scoring.

To his honor, he walked to the pan with the fixed determination to forget that Lefty was pitching, and to give his manager the very best that was in him.

And now Locke realized that the thing which had hitherto been in his favor was going to work the other way. If he knew intimately the likes and dislikes, the batting strength and weakness of each member of the opposing team, the man who faced him now was in a position to know quite as much, or more, about himself.

Lefty's face was a shade less brown as he toed the rubber, but his nerves were quite steady, his

courage unabated. He would do his best; no man could do more.

The cheering and comments in the stands had ceased. Even the murmur of voices died away as the spectators bent forward in breathless suspense.

The first one was not over, and Fargo refused to go after it.

"Ba-a-ll!" drawled the umpire.

"He'll put it over now," thought Fargo, swinging his stick gently. He had ceased to think of Lefty as his friend; he was now simply the pitcher of the rival team.

He was mistaken, however. Though it seemed to be Locke's intention to cut the pan, Fargo saw the ball break for a curve which would carry it just outside, and again he refrained from swinging.

"Two-oo!" said the umpire.

In the silence of the breathless crowd some one was heard to say:

"He's afraid of him. He don't dare let him hit it."

These words did not reach the southpaw's ears. The latter, however, had no intention of pitching himself into a hole if he could help it. He bent over a sizzler.

Fargo swung and missed, although he almost fancied that he felt the bat lightly touch the whistling ball. A murmur rose from the Blue Stockings' rooters.

A moment later, Lefty shot the ball back with a quick return, and, though he was not taken off his guard, the batter missed again.

The murmur rose.

Then Locke tried that slow, lingering ball which he could so cleverly deliver after going through movements which seemed to promise great speed.

Unfortunately Fargo had seen him try that same trick more than once, and he refused to be fooled. Watching the horsehide as it came up and dropped toward the ground, he let it settle into the catcher's hands without having moved his stick.

The Hornets' fans had a chance to yell, but their uproar was swiftly cut short. Now was the moment of greatest suspense. The next ball delivered would be decisive.

After what seemed an eternity, but which was, in reality, the briefest sort of pause, the southpaw pitched.

Fargo met the sphere on the trademark and sent it humming out on a line with the speed of a bullet.

CHAPTER XLII

THE TRUTH AT LAST

LIKE a flash, thousands of fans were on their feet. The roar which reverberated back and forth in the great inclosure was enough to shake the row of eagles ornamenting the roof of the grandstand. Hagin was off like a rocket. Siegrist was not far behind. Fargo himself showed that backstopping was not his only strong point.

As for Lefty, after that first awful moment of sinking which had followed the fatal crack of leather meeting wood, he brought himself together with a jerk, and whirled round.

Rufe Hyland, in right field, had not wasted an instant. Covering the ground with tremendous strides, he scooped the ball cleanly, spun around, and threw even while still in motion. It was meant to be a straight throw to the plate, but in a second Lefty saw that the fielder's forced turn had lost him every particle of body motion which might have helped out his arm, and knew the sphere would fall short.

Like a flash, the southpaw darted to one side, leaped into the air, and forked the ball with one hand. As he did so, Hagin, running like a racehorse, flung himself feet foremost to the ground, and slid over the plate.

Siegrist had raced down to second, and crossed the sack at full speed. When he saw Lefty intercept the ball and whirl toward third, he sought to turn back. Locke whipped the sphere straight into the hands of Pink Dalton, who was covering the second anchorage; and the latter, after jabbing it on to the lunging German, snapped it to first with a lightninglike motion, not even taking the time to straighten up.

It was one of the most surprising double plays ever seen on the New Grounds. Fargo, having rounded the sack and seen the ball speeding apparently toward the plate, naturally did not halt until he was nearly halfway to the second bassock. Even then he might have got back safely had it not been for the extraordinary accuracy of Dalton's throw. As it was, the finish of the play was close. The keen-eyed umpire declared Fargo out.

The applause of the Hornets' rooters suddenly ceased. It was followed by the cheers of their rivals. The home team had made a run, to be sure, but this abrupt and unexpected ending of the

inning rather took the wind out of their sails. They gave vent to their annoyance by heaping abuse on the umpire.

As Lefty walked to the bench his eyes sought the face of his manager questioningly. He felt no doubt that only for the success of this last play he would have been taken out of the game at once. Only one hit had been made off him, to be sure, but he knew that a pitcher is frequently removed when the game is going wrong through no fault of his own. Jack Kennedy showed no such intention, however.

"That was a heady play of yours, Lefty," he said. "I saw the ball would fall short the minute it left Hyland's hand. If you hadn't had your thinker working, we'd likely have had more than one tally to buck against."

"It was Dalton who put a kibosh on them," Locke returned. "That was some throw of his to first."

"Sure. But you used your nut and made it possible. One minute, Grant. You'd better—"

His voice dropped to a whisper, and Lefty walked away, his face slightly flushed, his eyes bright. Jack Kennedy was a manager who never hesitated about blowing up his men, and he could do it in a cutting, caustic manner much more

thorough than mere loud-mouthed ranting. He had also the much rarer trait of judicious praise, which was, perhaps, one of the reasons why he was so popular with his players.

The second inning presented no such spectacular features as had appeared in its predecessor. Elgin, cool, confident, and a little cocky, did not let a man pass second. The fans were beginning to yell rough pleasantries at him, and reporters who had been with the Hornets through the spring training harked back to the prophecies they had sent home regarding this youngster's exceptional ability.

Locke, on the other hand, was touched up for two singles, and had men on first and third with only one out. One of these was caught while trying to steal second, and put out by Nelson's beautiful throwing. The other was cantering toward the home plate, with the full expectation of scoring, when he discovered that the southpaw had reached forth a bare hand and plucked the batted ball out of the air, thus spoiling a base hit and ending the inning.

"Great work," chuckled Jack Stillman, up at the reporters' table, as he reached for his tobacco pouch.

"Great luck, I should say," retorted the news-

paper man next to him. "Looks to me like a fine case of horseshoes."

"I'm not so sure about that," put in the sporting editor of the *Blade,* who sat on Stillman's other side. "The boy seems to have a little gray matter, and there's a bulldog expression about his mouth and chin which makes me think he'll stand the pace longer than this Elgin, who's beginning to strut a little already. You saw quite a little of him down at Ashland, didn't you, Jack?"

Stillman did not answer. With the leather pouch, he had pulled from his pocket a crumpled envelope bearing the postmark of that very Texas town. For a second he stared at it in a puzzled way. Then he remembered. The hotel clerk had handed it to him just as he was leaving for the game with a bunch of fellows, and he had put it aside, intending to read it later, only to forget its existence completely.

With a swift jerk of one finger, he tore the envelope open. There was a long letter in the cramped, laborious handwriting of William Bowers, the ex-sergeant, but that was not what his eyes were fixed on with such curious intentness. He had received many of those letters in the past month, and all to no purpose. What he had never had before was this inclosure, an affidavit bearing

the seal of a notary public and signed by one Edward Black, and several witnesses.

With a swift-drawn breath, Stillman fairly raced through the document, his face flushing, his eyes snapping, an expression of the most intense satisfaction swiftly overspreading his countenance.

"By Jove!" he breathed, when he had finished. "He's got him at last! I knew that cur Elgin was responsible, and this proves it."

He half rose from his seat, only to drop back into it again as he realized the impossibility of reaching Brennan now.

"Afterward will do as well," he muttered. "If this doesn't blow the scoundrel clean out of water. I'm a lobster!"

CHAPTER XLIII

THE LUCKY SEVENTH

UNCONSCIOUS of the gathering storm, Bert Elgin continued his fine work. Inning after inning he held the visitors down, rising to his highest pitch of excellence in the fifth by striking out the opposing batters in one, two, three order.

His rival was equally successful so far as results went, but his methods were not as spectacular. He seemed not to exert himself until forced to the wall, and then, as likely as not, his manner of getting out of the hole was such that the bulk of spectators put it down to luck or the wonderful support back of him.

Thus it was that, while the metropolitan fans were howling themselves hoarse with praises for Elgin, the Blue Stockings' supporters could never be quite sure that the southpaw was not on the verge of "blowing up," and their rooting was more for the team as a body than for the man on the slab.

There were a few in the vast crowd, more ob-

servant than their neighbors, who realized the truth. Elgin was clever, to be sure, but little by little they saw how much of his success on the mound was due to the knowledge and experience of his fellow players.

Buck Fargo was a born backstop. Absolutely perfect in the mechanical side of his position, he was able to give his whole attention to the batter and, therefore, seemed to possess, almost uncannily, the power of sensing the sort of ball which would be, at any particular moment, most distasteful. Happily for Elgin, the pitcher had the sense to follow his catcher's signals implicitly.

In addition to this, the others of the team were in thorough sympathy with their pitcher. He had been one of them from the beginning of the season, and had deported himself with cleverness that won the liking of not a few. There were no jealousies and heartburnings to combat. They were beginning, also, to feel a certain measure of confidence in him, and their support was of the finished Big League sort, plus enthusiasm, which was a joy to see.

It was quite the contrary with their opponents. Though they might not realize it, the majority were still sore at having this busher put on the

slab for such an important game. They had no confidence in his ability to pull out successfully, and, though their playing was mechanically perfect, their support was that of men who are thinking of themselves and their averages.

During the last of the sixth the Hornets scored another tally on an error of the opposing shortstop, and the fans sat back comfortably, assured that the game was safe.

With the opening of the seventh, there was a sudden billowing up of the crowd throughout the entire circle of stands and bleachers. They stretched themselves and stamped their feet until the noise was like the deafening rattle of stage thunder. The visitors, though fearful of defeat, nevertheless raised the stentorian cry of "Lucky seventh! Lucky seventh! Here's where we do it!"

Eddie Lewis, the Blue Stockings' shortstop, was the first man up. Elgin eyed him critically, and, remembering that he had caught the man with an in-shoot once before, decided to repeat the trick. He had been growing more and more cocksure as the game progressed, so, when Fargo called for a straight, fast high ball, Elgin responded with his own views on the subject. It was time, he decided,

that he cut loose from the backstop's apron-strings. He had been hitched to them too long already.

Fargo repeated his signal, but Elgin shook his head obstinately. Finally he got the signal he wanted. Lewis stepped swiftly back; there was a ringing crack; the horsehide whizzed straight at Elgin, who—ducked!

He had never done such a thing before, but the total unexpectedness of the hit, and the fact that the sphere was humming straight at his head with the speed of a cannon ball, deprived him for a second of reason, and made his act instinctive.

Lewis got to first easily. The entire Hornets' infield made various caustic comments. From the stands the fickle crowd showered insults which brought the color flaming into Elgin's face and made him drop the ball when he received it from the outfielder.

The incident so disturbed him that he proceeded to present Nelson with a free pass, which brought loud cheers from the Blue Stockings' rooters, and more unflattering comments from the upholders of the home team.

"He's going up! He's going up!" chanted the visiting fans, grasping at a straw. "Send him to the stable! Put the blanket on him!"

Elgin gritted his teeth and faced Jack Daly as he toed the scratch, bland and smiling. Men were yelling advice to the batter; others flinging taunts at the man on the mound. The tumult was increasing steadily. Fargo, catching a glimpse of Elgin's face, dropped on one knee and deliberately adjusted his shoe-lace.

Daly let a wide one pass, and then banged out a grounder which, but for splendid fielding, would have been a hit. As it was, Dirk Nelson, forced from the initial sack, was put out at second by a hair. Daly reached first safely, and Eddie Lewis executed an impromptu jig on third.

By this time a perfect pandemonium had broken forth all over the stands. The visiting rooters, seeing hope for the first time, seemed trying to rattle the pitcher, while the fickle metropolitan fans howled at the unfortunate twirler they had been cheering so vociferously a short time before.

"Take him out! Take him out!" they bawled. "Russell! We—want—Cy!"

Amid this turmoil, Lefty Locke approached the pan, his heart pounding unevenly and his face glowing dully under the tan. So far he had shown little ability with the stick; nevertheless, the hopeful Blue Stockings' adherents greeted him uproariously.

"Kill it, Locke!" was the stentorian cry. "Kill it, old boy!"

The sound of their voices thrilled the southpaw. Only an abnormally cold-blooded youngster would have felt no thrill. It exalted him and made him confident that he could hit anything Elgin ventured to whip over.

There was a momentary pause as Fargo hurried into the diamond and spoke a few reassuring words to the white-faced twirler.

While he waited, leaning on his stick, Lefty cast a casual glance along the wide sweep of stands and boxes crowded with yelling, cheering humanity. The next instant his heart stood still. He was staring fixedly at an upper box that was filled with a gay party of men and women. As Lefty gazed with unbelieving wonder, a woman suddenly arose, straight and slim and girlish, her face flushing and her eyes bright. Smiling down at him, she waved a tiny handkerchief.

It was Janet Harting!

His face crimson, Lefty pulled off his cap a little awkwardly. How she happened to be there he had no idea. Who she was with he did not know—or care. She was watching him pitch his first Big League game, watching his trial by fire,

and she believed in him. He toed the slab, believing more than ever in himself.

Elgin's face was still pale and set. A moment before he had caught a glimpse of Brennan talking earnestly with Cy Russell, after which the pitcher peeled off his sweater and loped across the turf, beckoning to the second catcher. It looked as if the end were in sight.

Nevertheless, he ground his teeth and scowled fiercely at the hated Locke. He must get him—he must! The words rang dully through the pitcher's brain until he wondered whether he was speaking them aloud. He paused, looking beseechingly at Fargo, who repeated the signal.

Reluctantly Elgin wound up and pitched.

The southpaw's bat met the horsehide with a smash that sent it flying over Nolan's head toward the left field bleachers.

With a mingled cry of anguish and joy, the spectators leaped to their feet and followed the progress of the flying sphere with straining eyes. For a moment it looked as if the fielder might get it by fast sprinting, and Lewis halted an instant on third, head twisted, gauging the rapidly falling dot of white.

Then it was seen that Nolan must fail to make

the catch, and the runner was sent home with a rush, while voices accelerated Daly's flying progress from first. The latter rounded second without a pause just as the fielder made a beautiful recovery and lined the ball to third. There were frantic shrieks of "Slide! slide!" which Daly obeyed without hesitation, skimming over the ground amid a cloud of dust, to hook the hassock with his foot as the sphere smacked into Monte Harris' mitt.

The latter sent it humming back to second, for Lefty was coming down the line with the speed of a racehorse. But he, too, slid safely; and the breathless stillness was rent by the loud rejoicings of the great crowd of Blue Stockings' admirers who had come over from the neighboring city to watch their team open against the Hornets.

"Oh, you Locke!" they shrieked fondly. "What's the matter with Lefty? He's—all—right!"

When the thunder of their accompanying stamping had died away, they turned their attention to Elgin, calling for airships and the like, until their voices were drowned by the howls of the disappointed opposition:

"Take him out! Take him out! Take-him-out! He's yellow!"

The pitcher, white-faced, beads of perspiration besprinkling his forehead, stood shifting about near the slab, with downcast eyes and lips which trembled in spite of his efforts to steady them. Once he cast a swift glance toward the manager, but received no hoped-for sign.

He wanted to be taken out. He was afraid.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE LEADING RUN

BRENNAN'S reason for not doing at once the thing which was inevitable was not quite apparent. He had an obstinate streak in his make-up, and no doubt it went very much against the grain to see the man he had depended on and boasted about fall down so disasterously, though ordinarily that would have made no difference.

At any rate, he held his hand, and it cost him another run. Rufe Hyland landed on the second ball pitched, and sent out a long fly to right field. The moment Johnny Burns caught the ball Daly darted for the plate.

There was a momentary lull in the excitement as Burns made a great throw to Buck Fargo. Then the racket broke loose again as Daly slid over the dish in the nick of time; for Fargo had made a fruitless sweep of the hand to tag him.

With the score tied and Locke on third, the visiting fans yelled without interruption as Pink Dalton came to the plate. Fargo again tried to

brace Elgin up, but with poor success; and it was no credit to the pitcher that Red Pollock scooped up a red-hot grounder and lined it, sizzling, to the sack in time to end the inning and prevent further scoring.

A storm of hoots and catcalls greeted Elgin as he walked slowly and dejectedly toward the bench. Brennan said nothing, but the look he cast at the twirler was more expressive than many spoken words could have been. Elgin, his face as flaming now as it had been pale, hurried past him, and slunk thankfully to the obscurity of the bench.

When Lefty took his place on the slab, a roar of applause greeted him. He shot a glance at that upper box, and was even further heartened by the wave he received in return. His form was so perfect, and the support of his backers so full of new life and snap, that he retired the Hornets without letting a man reach second.

A lull followed. Cy Russell, in splendid shape and aching to retrieve the blunders made by his predecessor, easily disposed of the batters who faced him during the eighth and ninth innings.

Lefty was equally fortunate; and the tenth inning opened with the spectators on tiptoe with excitement, and some of them so hoarse they could scarcely speak above a whisper.

Again it was Eddie Lewis who came up first, and the sympathizers with the Blue Stockings seemed to take it as a good omen. All around the field the visiting rooters were waving hats and yelling like demons. Russell put the first ball squarely over for a strike, and followed it with another. Lewis cracked the third one to left field for a two-bagger.

With a concerted yell, every fan leaped to his feet. When Lewis made second safely they seemed to forget to sit down, so great was their excitement.

"Lay down a bunt, Dirk," Kennedy said quietly, as Nelson came up.

The catcher obeyed the injunction to the letter. He bunted the ball within two yards of the plate just as Lewis started for third. Russell was on the alert and ready, and, rushing swiftly toward the horsehide, he snatched it up and shot it with the speed of a bullet into Harris' hands. Lewis beat the throw, however, and was called safe, while Nelson reached first without difficulty.

"Here's the run! Here's the game!" came from the crowd as Jack Daly walked coolly to the plate. "Lewis will score!"

A safe hit or a long fly meant victory, if Locke continued his fine work and shut out the home

team in the last half of the inning. Lefty, swinging two bats to make one seem lighter when he should hit, felt his heart thudding like a trip-hammer.

On all sides men were waving their arms wildly and making a tremendous tumult. If only Daly could do it! Locke followed Daly, and he wondered vaguely whether he could make good if the third baseman failed.

Russell's first ball went wide of the plate. Another one came across waist high, and Daly fell on it with all his might. There was a twist on the sphere, however, and, instead of a smashing line drive, a short fly to right field resulted.

Burns called out that he would take it, and Russell raced behind Fargo to back up a throw to the plate. Burns made the catch easily, and was ready to throw Lewis out if he attempted to score.

The Blue Stockings' fielder was taking no chances, however. He stuck to third, waiting for something safer to take him home.

The witnesses who favored the Hornets applauded the catch, while the opposition strained their lungs rooting for Locke.

The latter felt a queer tightening of his throat as he toed the line. Again the opportunity had come for him to show what he could do.

Russell had never been cooler or less flurried. He worked skillfully until two strikes and as many balls had been called. The fear came to Lefty that he was going to whiff, and he set his teeth, watching the pitcher like a hawk.

Russell took his time. As the sphere left his fingers, Locke suddenly remembered a certain fast curve he had seen the Hornet man working up down in Texas, but which he had not used thus far in this game. The conviction flashed into his mind that it was being used now, and in an instant he had taken a single step forward, bringing his bat around with a powerful swing as he did so.

The connection was perfect, and the ball went curving out toward the left wing of the grand stand, looking for a second or two like a home run. It was too high for that, however, and fell in front of the stand a couple of yards inside the foul line.

The fielder got under it and smothered it effectually, making a long, powerful throw to the plate, toward which Lewis had sprinted the instant the catch was made. The ball went wide, however, and Lewis slid across the rubber in safety with the leading run.

CHAPTER XLV

LEFTY'S TRIUMPH

AGAIN the crowd cheered and yelled like lunatics, shouting Locke's name over and over as he walked toward the bench. His teammates surrounded him, patting him on the back and uttering brief, friendly words of praise. He was one of them now. He had won his spurs and fairly earned the right to their esteem.

But the game was not over. Russell fanned the next batter with swift precision, and the Blue Stockings took the field. Their supporters in the stands urged the southpaw, in frantic terms, to "Hold 'em!"

The Hornets' sympathizers were equally vehement in their entreaties to the home team to "Get in there and smash it out!" The uproar was deafening. It subsided only when Ed Nolan walked up and squared himself at the plate. There were a few last shouts of encouragement, and then silence, tense and absolute, fell upon the vast inclosure.

Lefty knew that the Hornets' fielder was a man

to fear. He could hit almost any kind of ball with ease. In fact, the southpaw, in spite of his having played so many practice games against the fellow, had never yet fathomed his hitting weakness. He wished that almost any other man in the batting list could have been the one to face him now, but there was no use pining for the impossible, so he proceeded to send over a tempting feeler.

But Nolan declined to be fooled. He disdained the first two balls, and the crowd began to shout for a free pass.

Then Lefty whipped over a good one, following it with a whizzer with a perplexing jump just before it reached the pan. But the batter was there with the goods, and, though he did not strike the horsehide quite squarely, he lashed it out between second and short.

Lewis lunged for it, and his fingers almost touched the sphere, but not quite. Nolan rounded first to the accompaniment of much joyful clamor.

And now came Fargo, the man who knew Locke's methods better than any other on the team. The southpaw worked him with the utmost care, pitching as he had never pitched before; and then, just as he fancied he had the backstop in a

hole, Buck suddenly and unexpectedly bunted, sending the ball rolling slowly toward first.

Lefty got the sphere, but secured it in bad position to throw. Without attempting to straighten up, he jerked it past Fargo, who was making the final long strides for the sack.

Grant should have caught it, for the throw was good. Perhaps he was too confident. Perhaps there was no excuse at all, for even Big League players make errors of that sort now and then. At all events, he dropped the ball. The spectators fairly made the stands shake with their raucous joy.

"Hit it out!" they shrieked. "Smash it on the nose! Here's where we get two runs and the game!"

Pollock did his best, but only succeeded in sending up a high fly into short center which the fielder secured with ease. Then Johnny Burns hurried up, eager to help things along, and confident that he could do it.

Lefty felt that the man was positively itching to hit. He could read it in the fellow's face and manner, and he determined to play upon the batter's eagerness. A high drop across Burns' shoulder deceived him, but did not shake his confidence. It was followed by another high ball,

which was, however, an inshoot, and again the Hornet fielder missed.

"Hit it, Johnny!" pleaded the local fans. "Don't let him fool you. Smash it out."

"Fan him!" shrieked the Blue Stockings' supporters wildly, their hopes beginning to rise again. "Fan him, Lefty! You've got to do it."

Lefty hesitated a second, his face cool and impenetrable, the muscles of his jaw sharply defined. He felt that the batter would expect him to try a coaxer; for, with no balls called, most pitchers would feel that they could afford to waste one or two.

He glanced round, his foot on the slab. When he turned back, he pitched without the slightest preliminary swing, sending over a high, straight, speedy ball. It had been his object to catch Burns unprepared, and he succeeded. The batter struck a second too late, and the ball spanked into Nelson's glove.

"Out!" called the umpire.

But the word was not heard because of the deafening roar which rose from the delighted visitors.

Lefty was scarcely conscious of the turmoil. It sounded faint and far away, like the beating of breakers on a rocky coast, and mingled insensibly

with the words he was saying over and over to himself:

"One more! Only one more! I must get him —I've got to!"

He dared not risk a glance at that upper box. The moment was too tense. And yet in his mind he pictured the girl leaning breathlessly over the railing, her tiny gloved hands clasped rigidly together, her face a little pale, her violet eyes wide open and almost black with excitement. She must not be disappointed—she should not!

How Sandy Rollins missed the first ball he reached for was something he never understood. When he struck, he felt absolutely certain that he would meet it full upon the trademark. His failure brought a ludicrous expression of surprise to his face.

The Blue Stockings' rooters yelled madly. Most of them were on their feet now, staring down into the diamond. The opposing fans, beginning to lose hope, divided their efforts between hurling caustic comments at the batter and trying to break the pitcher up.

In this latter attempt they were unsuccessful. Locke paid absolutely no attention to them. It is doubtful whether he was conscious of their presence. He was not faltering now. He was

wasting no time, yet he did not hurry. He put over an erratic curve that fooled Rollins even more than had the first one. Indeed, the ball seemed actually to dodge the bat as the Hornets' baseman slashed at it.

Another roar went up which drowned the umpire's voice. Nolan, quivering with eagerness, held himself ready to run, working off third. Lefty drove him back.

A hush settled upon the field. It almost seemed as if each little human atom of the thousands which overflowed the wide sweep of stand and bleacher had ceased to breathe. Even the coachers were silent for the instant—and Locke pitched.

Rollins' judgment told him that the ball would cut a corner when it broke. He was not mistaken. It came over; but, instead of crossing the outside corner, as he expected, it took such a sharp, amazing shoot over the inside that the batter missed cleanly.

"Out!" shouted the umpire, flinging up one hand.

CHAPTER XLVI

HOW IT ALL HAPPENED

CHEER after cheer went up from the throng of visiting fans. Hats and canes and newspapers were thrown into the air with careless abandon. Men brought their fists down on shoulders and heads of persons they had never seen before; and these persons merely pushed out the tops of crushed derbies, and grinned.

Down from the stands they poured like a cataract, yelling Locke's name. They caught and surrounded him before he could flee to the shelter of the clubhouse.

Jack Stillman was one of the first to reach the field. Though he longed to hurry over to Lefty and shake his friend's hand, there was something more important which must be done first. He headed straight for Brennan, who, with gloomy countenance, was about to leave the field.

"Wait a second, Jim," the reporter called swiftly. "I've got something to tell you. You fired Lefty Locke because you thought he was a quitter," he went on when they came together.

"You needn't rub it in," snapped the sorely tried manager. "If that's all you've got to say—"

"It isn't," returned Stillman quickly. "Locke said he never wrote that fake telegram which called him away from Ashland the day of the game he was to pitch. He told the truth. It was sent by one of his own teammates, who hated him and wanted to put him in bad."

"What?" exploded the stocky manager. "I don't believe it!"

The reporter pulled a folded paper from his pocket and handed it to Brennan. "There's the proof," he said quietly.

The manager jerked it open and cast his eyes hurriedly down the sheet. Wrath clouded his face.

"Elgin!" he growled throwing back his head. "Where is he? Just let me— Hey, you Elgin! Come here!"

His voice and manner had drawn several curious players near, among them Buck Fargo. The disgruntled pitcher, hearing his name uttered in that tone, came reluctantly over, expecting a call-down for his work on the slab. What followed was totally unexpected.

"You can pack!" Brennan snapped, eying the

fellow with a look of scathing contempt. "I'm going to send you down to the 'Lobsters.' They want a pitcher, and they can have you—for keeps, if I can't sell you." The Lobsters were a much scoffed-at minor league club.

Elgin's jaw dropped and his face flamed scarlet. "You're going to send me down to the—the Lobsters?" he stammered.

"I am. I've found out the dirty trick you played on Locke in Ashland, and I wouldn't have a scoundrel like you on my team if you was the best pitcher in the country—which you ain't, by a long shot."

For an instant the pitcher stood staring at him, an indescribable expression on his face. He cast a single swift glance at the players standing around. Then, without a word, he turned and walked hastily away through the gathering crowd.

"Good riddance!" growled Brennan.

He stood chewing meditatively on the stub of an unlighted cigar. After a moment he shrugged his shoulders and pushed his way through the crowd to where Lefty and a few of the Blue Stockings were hemmed in by the throng.

"You did a fine job, kid," he said gruffly, thrusting out a square, stubby hand. "Shake!"

Without hesitation Lefty gripped his fingers.

Brennan's treatment had caused him some bitter hours, but this was no time to harbor resentment. The short manager turned to Kennedy, his mouth twisted in a wry smile.

"You can kick me good and hard, Ken," he said. "I sure fell flat on this deal." His eyes twinkled, and the smile broadened to a grin. "I sort of think this boy belongs to me. I had the first rights to him, and I reckon I'll pull him back now."

"Not if I know it!" laughed Kennedy. "You were thick enough to release him unconditionally. He belongs to me now, and you bet he's going to stay."

But old Jack could not foresee the approaching wave of change that was to leave him stranded as a baseball manager. Nor was Lefty Locke, in spite of the splendid beginning he had made, to find it all fair sailing in the Big League. With Kennedy retired and Lefty missing, following his suspension by the new manager, the Blue Stockings were destined to have their troubles in the fight for the pennant. How old Jack and the young southpaw star returned to the field of battle barely in time to save the day is dramatically told in "Lefty o' the Blue Stockings," the third volume of The Big League Series.

Brennan chuckled a little over Kennedy's re-

tort, and then turned to Lefty, his face suddenly serious.

"I've found out about that fake telegram," he said, in a low tone. "Jack Stillman ferreted out the truth, and the Hornets won't have any further use for Elgin."

He walked away without waiting for a reply, leaving Lefty almost bewildered at the events which were coming so thick and fast. In the midst of everything, however, he kept thinking of Janet and wondering whether there was any possible chance of her coming down upon the field.

The question was swiftly answered by the appearance of Jack Stillman, elbowing his way through the crowd.

"Some pitching for a starter in the Big League, old man," he laughed, his face glowing; "you were pretty fair! I can't keep you now, though; there's somebody over by the stand who wants a word with you. See you in the clubhouse, later."

Taking his friend by the arm, he piloted him through the throng, now beginning to stream toward the gates, to a point from which he could see the girl he had been thinking about so much. She stood near one of the lower boxes of the center stand, a slim, graceful figure in a blue tailor-made gown. At a little distance her friends were

gathered, watching the animated scene interestedly.

Janet herself was talking earnestly to Buck Fargo, but her eyes were quick to spy out Lefty as he approached. The glad smile she gave him was something to be treasured long in his memory.

"Lefty!" she exclaimed, in a low voice, which vibrated with emotion. She took a quick step forward; their hands met. "I can't tell you how glad and proud I am—and sorry."

The man held her hands for an instant. His face was puzzled.

"Sorry?" he repeated. "What have I done to make you sorry?"

Her lovely eyes were fixed earnestly on his. Fargo had slipped away.

"Nothing," she returned hastily. "What you have done is splendid—wonderful! It's what I did that makes me sorry. Mr. Fargo has just told me everything, and I hate myself when I think how I—liked that dreadful Mr. Elgin—and tried to make you friends, and—and—"

She stopped abruptly and bit her lip. Lefty looked around. Never before had he detested a crowd with such intensity. His eyes flashed back to hers, and something in their expression

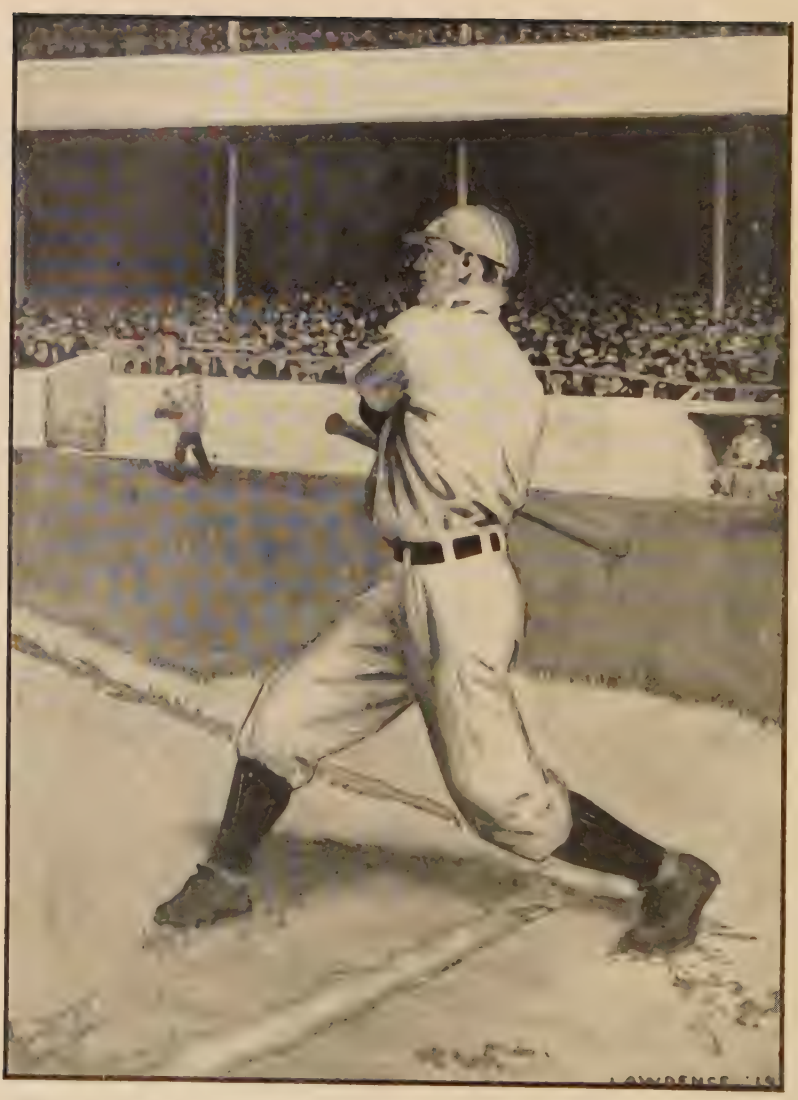
brought a vivid rush of crimson flaming to her face.

"You mustn't think about it," he urged softly. "You weren't to blame, and, anyway, it's all over now. Everything's turned out right. Please forget it."

His fingers tightened about hers. Her lids drooped. They had forgotten the crowd pouring out of the field. The clatter and tramp in the swiftly thinning stands, the last few cheers from the departing rooters, fell upon deaf ears. In that single moment they were conscious of nothing else in the whole wide world but just each other.

THE END

LEFTY O' THE BLUE STOCKINGS



THERE WAS A SHARP, CLEAN CRACK, AND THE HORSEHIDE WENT HUMMING INTO THE OUTFIELD.

LEFTY
O' THE BLUE STOCKINGS

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of "Lefty o' the Bush," "Lefty o' the Big League," "Lefty o' the Training Camp."

ILLUSTRATED

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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Printed in the United States of America

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LEFTY O' THE BLUE STOCKINGS

CHAPTER I

THE UNLUCKY SEVENTH

IT was "Bush" Aldrich, of the Specters, who started the trouble by smashing out a two-base hit in the seventh. Bush was one of the latest acquisitions of that hard-hitting, snappy, scrappy aggregation of Big League talent which had fought its way into the first division, and was giving last season's pennant winners, the Blue Stockings, a decidedly uncomfortable time holding their all too scanty lead.

Bush had already shown his ability to stay with fast company by getting two clean singles off Grist, the Blue Stocking twirler, but fine fielding had prevented either bingle from being effective. Now, however, with one out, and a man on first and third, either through luck or cleverness, he hit again at the psychological moment to cause a break in the hard-fought game.

Grist, sure that he had fathomed the young-

ster's weakness, tried his sharp outdrop, which had pulled the right fielder more than once before. This time, however, Aldrich was ready for it. Poising a bat that was a bit longer than any he had used before, he stepped in as the ball curved and smote it a crack which brought half the spectators in the crowded stands to their feet with a concerted gasp of dismay.

As the sphere whistled out on a line, Larry Dalton, the Blue Stocking second baseman, flung up his hands in a ludicrous gesture of despair. Brock, the slim, speedy center fielder, had already turned his back on the home plate, and was flying toward the fence like a deer that has heard the whistling whine of a hunter's bullet. Unfortunately, the ball held up better than he expected, and, though he strained every nerve, he saw that there was little chance to make the catch.

With a last desperate spurt, he launched himself through the air like a catapult, both hands outstretched. The horsehide struck the ends of his fingers, and a despairing groan rose from the staring fans as it fell to the ground and rolled to one side.

Brock snatched it up, and whipped it back into the diamond. Bugs Murray was just jogging over the plate. Logie, the Specter shortstop, had rounded second, and was flying toward third, urged on by staccato promptings from the coach-

ing line. Aldrich was fairly tearing up the ground between first and second. As the sphere came whirling toward the waiting Dalton's eager hands, Bush slid.

The umpire, squatting to watch the play, put his hand out, palm downward; and another groan arose from the stands, punctuated by protesting yells and bitter comment.

"They're gone!" shouted the Specter captain joyously. "They're up in the air! Hit her on the nose, Rowdy; you can do it!"

Kenyon, the visitor's clever second baseman, pranced, grinning, to the plate, seemingly inspired with new life. Grist caught the ball deftly, apparently undisturbed by the unfortunate break. As he paused to drive Logie back to third, however, he discovered that Carson, the new manager, had left the coaching line and returned to the bench, from which he could get an accurate view of the entire field.

"He needn't worry," muttered the pitcher to himself, as he turned back to face the smiling batter. "We're still one run to the good, and this little flurry is going to have the kibosh put on it right here and now."

He had little fear of Kenyon doing anything; so far Rowdy's hitting had been of a decidedly negligible quality. Perhaps it was this touch of unconscious carelessness which proved Pete

Grist's undoing; perhaps it was due simply to the mysterious hitting streak which comes at the most unexpected times, and without apparent reason. At all events, after playing the waiting game to the last moment, Kenyon finally smashed a sizzler through the short field, scoring Logie, and himself reaching first by a great sprint.

Instantly the entire Specter visiting team began openly to rejoice:

"Up in a balloon!" "Got him going!" "Here's where we lock it up in a valise!" "Murder it, Ted, old man!" "Laminate it! Only one down, you know."

A low, concerted growl began to sound from the spectators who crowded the stands. Ready to shout themselves hoarse for a man pitching a winning game, their displeasure was even more swift, and quite without mercy. Here and there a shrill voice bawled admonition and biting criticism, which sounded above the barking chorus of the Blue Stocking infield:

"Get into him, Pete, old man!"

"Kill him, old boy! You can do it!"

"Warp 'em round his neck!"

A spot of red glowed dully in each tanned cheek as Grist dug his copper toe clip into the earth and cuddled the ball under his chin. The sudden yelping from his teammates told the pitcher that they were not sure of him. They were seeking

to brace him up, as if he had been a raw recruit instead of the bright particular star of the Blue Stocking pitching staff. Moreover his quick eye had not failed to notice the hasty appearance of two men from the sheltered players' bench, who loped off to the right, shedding sweaters as they went.

There are times when it takes very little to upset the equilibrium of the most seasoned twirler, and apparently this was one of them. For six innings Grist had pitched an almost errorless game, and there was every reason why he should do his best to finish it.

Dillon was laid up, Bill Orth had a bad shoulder, and both Reilly and Lumley were notoriously independable at a moment like this. There was Lefty Locke, to be sure, but the thought of this brilliant young southpaw who had, in a few short months, pushed his way upward until he rivaled Grist himself in the esteem of players and fans alike, made the older pitcher squirm inwardly, and brought a dogged, determined expression to his face.

A moment later there was a crack, a yell of joy from the Specters, a groan from the despairing fans. In spite of his self-control, a smothered gasp of dismay burst from Grist's lips. Knowing Red Callahan's impetuosity, he had tried to tempt him with a teasing outdrop. That he man-

aged to connect with it was probably quite as much a surprise to the sorrel-topped third baseman as to anyone; but connect he did in beautiful style, smashing out a single which sent Aldrich across the rubber with the leading run.

Above the uproar of hoots and yells and catcalls from the stands, the new manager, half rising to signal Orth to go into the box, heard a sound he had rather been expecting for the past few minutes:

"Carson! One moment!"

It was the sharp, incisive voice of the Blue Stockings' owner, who sat with his daughter in one of the boxes just behind the bench, and there was an imperative note in it which brought the manager hurrying in that direction.

"Did you call me, Mr. Collier?" he asked, as he reached the box.

The tall, broad-shouldered, keen-faced man bent swiftly over the railing.

"I did," he replied, in a low tone. "Grist is going to pieces. Why don't you take him out?"

"I was just going to. I've had Orth warming up for three or four minutes."

Charles Collier frowned. "Orth!" he exclaimed. "But his shoulder's lame. This is no time to put in a cripple. Why don't you use your southpaw, Locke?"

"He pitched a hard game yesterday and—"

"And won it," interrupted the owner swiftly.

"Quite so; but my idea was not to work him too hard," returned the manager suavely. "Of course, if you wish it—"

"I do. In my opinion he's the only man who can stop the break and pull things together. He's got the measure of every one of these fellows. I don't think you need worry about three innings hurting his arm."

"Very well," said Carson. "I'll send him out there at once."

His expression was bland and pleasant, but the instant his back was turned he frowned. "Butting in as soon as this, are you?" he muttered, striding toward the bench. "Picked a favorite already, too. I s'pose Pete'll be sore as a crab, but it can't be helped. Locke!"

There was a quick movement, and from the players' bench appeared a tall, lithe, cleanly built, long-armed youngster of twenty-three or so, his cap pushed back on a mass of heavy, dark brown hair, a look of inquiry in his keen, brown eyes.

"Want me?"

"Yes," said Carson sharply. "Get into the box as quick as you can. I meant to use Orth, but his shoulder's bad. You'll have to go in without warming up. And hold 'em, kid. We can't afford to lose this game, you know."

Lefty had already yanked off his sweater.

Even as the manager finished, he caught the glove tossed out by the second catcher.

"I'll do my best," he returned, jerking his cap forward over his eyes.

An instant later he was walking out upon the diamond with a lithe, springy stride which told of splendid muscles under perfect control. And as he came into view of the grandstand, the hoots and yells lessened swiftly, merging with amazing abruptness into a shout of delight, accompanied by a thunderous stamping of feet.

"Oh, you Lefty!" shrieked the fans fondly. "Oh, you kiddo! Kill 'em! Eat 'em alive! Nothin' doin' now, Specters. Good night for yours!"

CHAPTER II

STOPPING A RALLY

BY dint of playing for time, and putting over a couple of wide ones, Pete Grist had prevented Forbes, the Specter left fielder, from adding to the damage already done. Knowing that he would be taken out, he had the wit to seize every possible chance to delay the game, and thus run no risk of making any further errors.

He supposed, however, that his successor would be Orth, whom he had seen start to warm up a few minutes before. When Lefty appeared on the field amid the delighted roars of the spectators, Grist's face turned a brick red, and for a second or two he looked as if he could have committed murder with the greatest possible enjoyment.

It is provoking enough, in all conscience, for a pitcher to have to leave the box on account of bad control. But to be superseded by a youngster whose Big League experience is limited to a few months, yet who, in that time, had set the fans yelling for him as if he were a Mathewson, is suf-

ficiently humiliating to stir the mildest man tc wrath.

Mildness was not Pete Grist's long suit, nor was this the first time he had writhed in the grip of the green-eyed monster. As Locke reached him his face was like a thundercloud. He fairly flung the ball at the southpaw, and, without a word, turned on his heel and strode toward the bench.

Lefty stood for an instant staring after him, a touch of sympathy in his eyes. He knew from experience precisely how it felt to be benched under such circumstances.

"Tough luck," he murmured, as he mounted the hill. "I don't blame him for being sore. I would myself."

Directly, however, he had thrust the disgruntled pitcher from his mind, and was bringing all his skill and cunning to bear on the task before him. He knew the importance of winning the game to-day. It was one of those close seasons, with three teams fighting like bulldogs for first place.

At first the struggle had seemed to lie between the Blue Stockings and their old-time rivals, the Hornets. Well into July these two organizations had it nip and tuck, and the Blue Stockings had no sooner forged definitely ahead than they were menaced by the speedy Specters, who were play-

ing this year as they had never played before. Back and forth they zigzagged, until at length the Blue Stockings, thanks in no small measure to the astonishing work of their young southpaw wonder, managed to accumulate a scanty lead, and hold it by the skin of their teeth.

If they could only manage to pull through this series in good shape, they could afford to lose a game or two of the return series, and still enter on the last Western circuit with a slight advantage.

Lefty lined a few to Dirk Nelson, and, having found the plate, nodded to the batter, who stepped up to the rubber again. The Blue Stockings' owner had been right in saying that Locke had taken the measure of the opposing team. The ability to size up swiftly and accurately a batter's strong and weak points, likes and dislikes, was something which had contributed much to the southpaw's extraordinary success. He believed he knew the sort of ball Forbes could not hit safely; and promptly, though without any appearance of haste, he proceeded to hand it up.

To the delight of the fans, the batter missed. The second one he fouled. Then he let two go by. Finally he missed again, having been fooled at last by a sudden change of pace and a slow drop when he expected speed. As he sauntered toward the bench in elaborate affectation of in-

difference, the spectators chortled gleefully, while a ripple of returning confidence swept over the Blue Stocking players.

"Never mind that!" cried Murray, the visitors' captain, from the coaching line. "Get off that hassock, Rowdy. On your toes! Now, Jim, let's have one of the old-timers mother used to make."

Donovan, the famous Specter twirler, was also a clever stickman. During the past season his hitting average had been little short of the three-hundred mark, and he was especially noted for helping along a streak of luck. He walked up to the plate, bat swinging nonchalantly, on his face that confident grin which annoys many a pitcher who pretends that he is not disturbed.

Lefty eyed him coolly for an instant; then his eyes dropped to where Nelson crouched, giving a signal. He shook his head. With some slight reluctance, the catcher responded by calling for another ball, and shifted his position the barest trifle. A second later the sphere came whistling, with a slight inswerve, across the batter's shoulders. Forbes' bat found nothing but empty air.

"Str-r-rike!" called the umpire, flinging up his right hand.

"Look out for those, Jim," called Murray. "Make 'em be good!"

Donovan let the next one pass. It was a ball.

Then followed a slow one, delivered with a swing and snap that fooled the batter into striking before the lingering, tantalizing horsehide was within reach.

Donovan frowned and regained his balance, annoyed slightly by the burst of raucous delight from the stands. When he faced the pitcher again the grin still curved his lips, but it had grown somewhat thin.

Silence settled over the field. Ten thousand straining eyes were turned anxiously on the quiet figure in the pitcher's box.

Lefty's hand drew back slowly, cuddling the ball for a second as he poised himself on one foot. Then, like a flash, his long left arm swung flail like through the air.

The ball was high—almost too high, it seemed at first. But suddenly it flashed downward past Donovan's shoulders, and across his breast. Too late the batter saw it drop, and tried weakly to hit. There was a swish, a plunk, and—

"Batter's out!" bawled the umpire.

CHAPTER III

TIED IN THE EIGHTH

"PRETTY work," commented a blond young man on the reporter's bench, pushing back his rakish green hat. "There's one thing about Locke, you can always bank on his using his head. He certainly stopped that rally in great shape."

"Huh!" grunted the stout, bald man beside him. "I can't see anything very wonderful in that." He took off his glasses, and began to polish them. "It don't take any extraordinary amount of skill to outguess Forbes, and Donovan's never very dangerous to a pitcher who knows him."

"Oh, come now, Eckstein," protested the blond reporter. "Jim's no slouch at the bat, and you know it. What have you got against Locke, anyhow?"

Eckstein replaced his glasses, and yawned. "Nothing special, Dyer," he drawled. "I've been too long in the business, though, to lose my

head over every infant phenom who butts into the Big League. More than half of 'em can't keep up the pace they set themselves at first."

"I'll bet Locke does," Dyer said energetically. "He's got too much sense to use himself up the way some of the cubs do. He plays the game for all there is in it, but he plays it with his head even more than with that corking portside hooker of his. Anyhow, he's the Blue Stockings' one best bet this season, take it from me, Eck. Only for him they'd be in the second division, with all this monkey business of new owner and new manager right in the middle of the season. That plays hob with a team even if the old manager's a bum, which Jack Kennedy wasn't, by a long shot. By the way, Eck, where's he gone?"

"Who? Kennedy?" grunted the stout man, his eyes fixed on the diamond. "Back to his farm, I reckon. He's got one somewhere in the Middle West.—Pretty work, Jim. That's the way to pull 'em."

With a sudden flush at the realization that he had missed a trick, the young reporter hastily subsided, and turned his attention to the diamond. Whatever might be said of Jim Donovan's hitting ability, no fault could be found with his skill in the box. Encouraged by the success of the last inning, he evidently realized that it was up to him to see that the Specters kept their lead

of one run, and the result was an exhibition of clever pitching.

Dirk Nelson, the Blue Stocking backstop, was beguiled into popping to second. Jack Daly, unsurpassed as a third baseman, but an erratic stickman, fanned ignominiously. It looked as if Lefty would follow Daly's example, but, with two and two called, he connected with a tricky drop, and beat the ball to first by a hair. Taking a good lead, he went down on the second ball pitched to Spider Grant. It was effort wasted, however, for the Blue Stocking first baseman presently fouled out back of third. This brought the inning to an abrupt termination, amid much rejoicing on the part of the visitors, and low grumbling from the disappointed fans.

"Well," said Dyer defensively, "it was the tail end of the list. Anyhow, Locke got a hit."

Eckstein chuckled. It amused the veteran newspaper man to note the violent fancies and prejudices of callow cub reporters.

"Still harping on the virtues of your miraculous southpaw?" he smiled. "I'll ask you just one question, Dyer: If he's such a triple-plated wonder, how did Jim Brennan, of the Hornets, come to release him outright? I never yet knew the hard-headed old vet to let any ten-thousand-dollar beauties slip through his fingers."

"Still something to learn, Eck, strange as that

may seem,'' drawled a voice, before Dyer had time to answer. ''Squeeze up a bit, and give a chap some room.''

A leg was thrust over the back of the seat, followed swiftly by another, and, as Eckstein's eyes lighted upon the tanned and freckled face of the newcomer, his own face expanded in a fat smile.''

''Well, well, well!'' he chuckled, thrusting out a plump hand. ''Back to the treadmill, eh? Have a good vacation?''

''Fine!'' returned Jack Stillman, settling down between the two. ''How are you, Dyer? Spent ten days up in the woods about a thousand miles away from anywhere, and then I began to get worried for fear this understudy of mine wasn't sending the dope in right. How about it, kid? Old man have any kicks?''

''A few,'' grunted the cub reporter. ''He'd kick if he had the Angel Gabriel writing up games.''

''You bet he would!'' laughed Stillman. ''Swell lot Gabriel knows about baseball. Did I hear you running down my friend Locke?'' he went on, turning to Eckstein. ''Oh, I know you didn't mean anything personal. It's just your pessimistic mind, that can't see anything good in a youngster. Well, let me tell you what Jim Brennan said the last time I saw him, which

was about three weeks ago. 'Jack,' he said—it was after that last game of the series with the Blue Stockings when the Hornets got the pants licked off 'em—'Jack,' he said, 'don't send this to your paper, but if ever there was a dumb one manhandling a baseball team I'm it. I'd give two of my best men to have Lefty Locke back again. If I hadn't been such a thick-headed dope as to let him go, the Hornets wouldn't be where they are to-day. No, sir! They'd be at the top of the heap, with that position just about nailed. That boy's a wonder. It makes me sick at the stomach every time I think he might be on my payroll to-day just as well as not.' That's going pretty strong for old sorrel-top, isn't it?"

"A trifle," Eckstein returned. "Well, why did he let him go? There must have been some mighty good reason."

"There was. A rotten sneak named Elgin—a Princeton man, by the way, and a disgrace to the college—had it in for Lefty, and turned every dirty trick he could think of to put Locke in bad with Brennan. He succeeded temporarily, but he got his at last. After Brennan released him Lefty went to the Blue Stockings, and of course the first time Jim ran up against them he realized how he'd been fooled. It all came out, and he sent Elgin back into Class C with the Lobsters. I've heard Elgin didn't even stay

there, but is pitching back in the bush, which, if true, is good enough for him.

"By Jove! See that drop? Fooled him nicely, didn't it?"

If Donovan was on his mettle, the opposing southpaw was in equally fine trim. In the first of the eighth only four men faced him, in spite of the fact that the heavy hitters were coming up again.

"Don't seem to have lost any of his cunning," smiled Stillman, as the Blue Stockings romped in from the field like colts. "Things appear to have been didding while I was gone," he went on in a lower tone to Eckstein. "I knew Collier was dickering for the team, but I thought he'd hold off till the end of the season. And what in thunder does he mean by canning a manager like Jack Kennedy?"

The stout man shrugged his shoulders. "Collier got the idea that the team wasn't pulling well. He seemed to think that was Kennedy's fault."

"Bah!" snapped Stillman. "What could Kennedy do with his hands tied? I know for a fact that when he wanted to get rid of a certain trouble-maker who was keeping the boys riled up all the time, Beach, the old owner, put his foot down, and wouldn't let him. And what's Al Carson ever done, anyhow, that he should supersede an experienced man like Kennedy?"

"Not much," admitted Eckstein.

"Nor ever will. He's one of those promising characters who's always promising and never making good. Collier has sure picked a lemon this time, and it wouldn't surprise me a lot if it cost him dear.

"Now, fellows, get busy, and hammer out a couple of runs. Only need one to tie, and two to win."

All over the great stands men were rooting for runs—begging, pleading, crying for them. As Donovan stepped into his box a perfect bedlam of hoots and catcalls arose, but he was too old a bird to be affected in the least by this sort of thing. To win the game it was only necessary to hold the Blue Stockings for this inning and the next, and the clever Specter twirler looked as if shutting out his opponents was, at this precise moment, merely a matter of time with him.

In baseball, as in many other things, it never pays to discount the future; which is just as well, for otherwise a good deal of thrill and excitement would be lost. The best players are certain sometimes to make mistakes, and countless games have been won or lost by little slips, so small as to pass unnoticed by the majority of spectators.

Rufe Hyland, well known as a "waiter," was the first man up. In spite of the frantic urgings of the excited fans to "Slug it out!" he delayed

until he had three and two on him. Finally he hit between first and second. He should have been an easy victim at first, but, for some unaccountable reason, Rowdy Kenyon juggled the ball, and then threw low, dragging Murray off the sack.

For a moment or two the entire infield resounded with sulphurous comment. When Donovan faced the next batter he was still flushed with irritation. He took revenge by fanning Larry Dalton, but during that process Hyland managed to steal second, a proceeding which did not tend to increase the pitcher's good humor.

Nevertheless, he retained a perfect grip on his feelings, and exerted his skill so well that Herman Brock whiffed fruitlessly at three balls in succession.

It happened, however, that Joe Welsh, who followed, was one of the most dependable hitters in the Blue Stocking organization. His specialty was neither home runs nor three-baggers, but his skill at placing the ball had long been a source of comfort to his fellow-players. As he faced the plate, Hyland edged off second as far as he dared, and when Joe connected with the third ball pitched Rufe shot down the line like a streak.

Due, no doubt, to Donovan's skill, this was one of the rare occasions that Welsh slipped up. He had intended to dump the pill into the diamond

by a bunt, but he succeeded only in sending it spinning erratically just inside the third-base line.

Like a flash the Specter backstop raced out, snatched at it, fumbled horribly, and then, in an effort to get Hyland, threw four feet over the third baseman's head. By the time the left fielder, slow in backing up, had secured the sphere, and lined it back to the plate, Hyland had one foot on the rubber. And the delirious fans were shrieking themselves speechless.

CHAPTER IV

REAL PITCHING

"TALK about horseshoes!" grinned Stillman, when the first mad uproar had begun to lessen. "That's the greatest ever. Looks as if the boys had a mighty good chance of cinching the game now."

Manager Carson had emerged from the obscurity of the bench, and was on the coaching line again. Over by first base Captain Grant was capering about, a broad grin on his face.

"Going up, going up, going up!" he chanted to the air of a popular ditty. "Tied her nicely, but we won't stop there. You know what to do, Kid. Beat it off that cushion, Joe!"

Kid Lewis hustled to the plate, and Welsh pranced away from the sack, ready to go down on the first slim chance. Unfortunately for the Blue Stockings, Donovan seemed unaffected by the two blazing errors which had permitted the locals to even up the tally. Instead of going to pieces, he tightened up wonderfully, holding Welsh at first, and fanning the batter with swiftness and dispatch.

As the Blue Stockings took the field for the opening of the ninth the fans were on tiptoe with excitement. If Lefty could hold the visitors down, there remained a chance for the home team to break the deadlock in the last half. Could he hold them?

Bush Aldrich was the first man up. The crowd remembered vividly what Bush had done to Pete Grist. Besides, the batters who followed were none of them slouches. As Locke walked briskly across the diamond the stands echoed with encouraging, beseeching shouts. Then a sudden, tense silence fell upon the great inclosure.

Calm and steady, Lefty stepped into the box. He paused a second, his eyes on the batter, and then handed up a high one. Aldrich started to strike, but checked himself, and a ball was called. Then the southpaw tried an outcurve. Bush still declined to bite.

"That's right, Bush," cried Murray. "Make him put 'em over. He's got to."

An elusive drop followed, which Aldrich barely missed. The next ball looked good, and he hit it. It was a line drive to right, which Rufe Hyland should have taken with ease, instead of muffing. Aldrich stretched himself, and reached the initial sack a second before the ball, quickly recovered and thrown by the discomfited fielder, spanked into Spider Grant's mitt.

There was a groan from the fans, a spasm of joy from the Specter coachers. Rowdy Kenyon hurried to the plate. True to his record as a waiter, he prolonged the agony till the last moment, during which time Aldrich, upholding the reputation of his team for being "ghosts on the bases," got down to second. Finally the visiting infielder hit a weak scratch between second and short, on which he reached first by great sprinting. A wave of tense uneasiness swept over the field.

Lefty's eyes narrowed the least bit; his jaw seemed to tighten. In a few minutes, through no fault of his, the situation had changed from easy security to uncertain hazard. With none out, and a man on third, every bit of judgment and skill he possessed was needed to save the day. Driving Aldrich back with a threatening motion, he turned his attention to Callahan, and the impetuous Specter Irishman, after fouling twice, failed to touch a speedy shoot that clipped a corner.

A gasp of relief came from the stands, but lapsed swiftly into tense silence; for this was an admirable opportunity to try the squeeze play, and evidently from the way John Forbes held his bat he meant to do his part.

The infield crept into the diamond, balancing on their toes, alert and ready. Lefty pitched, and almost as soon as the ball left his hand he was

on the jump. Forbes shortened his bat, and chopped one down the foul line straight into the flying pitcher's glove on the first bound. Lefty Locke flashed it to third. But, for some reason, Aldrich had faltered, and now he dove back to the sack in time to save himself.

"Safe!" bawled the umpire, his flat hand extended.

The decision brought an avalanche of hoots and yells and taunting insults down upon his head, but he stuck to it; and when the fans settled back to take count their hearts sank within them. With the bases full and only one out, the situation was not exactly hopeful.

Lefty made short work of Donovan. The visiting pitcher did not touch the ball once, missing the last bender by more than a foot. As he strolled back to the bench, however, there were few sounds of rejoicing. The end of the batting list had been reached. The bases were still densely populated, and Dutch Schwartz, the mighty hitter whose average the year before had come close to equaling that of the amazing Wagner, was sauntering out with his war club.

Apparently he had no weaknesses with the stick, and his ability to outguess pitchers had made him a terror throughout the Big League. Cautious twirlers usually walked him when it was possible to do so at a dangerous time without forcing a

run; but, even had he wished to do it, such a course was not open to Lefty now.

Whatever anxiety the southpaw might have been feeling, he faced the batter without a tremor. The first ball was a trifle close, and Schwartz let it pass without suffering a penalty. The next, delivered with a long side swing, came over at an odd angle. The batter fouled it, evening up the score.

Lefty then tried an underhanded delivery that was productive of another foul. Then the big Specter center fielder refused to nibble at a coaxer, which evened things once more.

"Two and two," muttered Stillman on the reporters' bench. "I wonder if he'll do it? By Jove! He's got to!"

With anxious, admiring eyes he watched his friend's cool, deliberate, yet not in the least dragging, work. Lefty's perfect control enabled him to bend the ball over the rubber from any angle.

Foul after foul resulted with a nerve-racking regularity which brought the fans to the edges of their seats in tense, breathless suspense.

Three balls were called, but the struggle continued. With each swing of the southpaw's long arm, Schwartz swung his bat, and the ball caromed off in a foul. One could almost have heard a pin drop in the vast inclosure. Even the raucous

voices of the coachers had been momentarily stilled.

The end came at last, suddenly. When it seemed almost certain that Locke had exhausted every trick at his command, the pitcher, with his toe on one end of the slab, stepped straight out to one side with the other foot, and brought his arm over. The ball left his fingers at the moment when his hand seemed to be extended at full reach above his head. Apparently it was not a curve he threw, but from his extended fingers the sphere shot downward on a slant, to cross the outside corner of the plate.

Schwartz struck at it with a sharp, vicious snap —and missed!

CHAPTER V

ONE FOR LEFTY

THE roar which went up fairly shook the stands, and testified to a sudden slackening of the tension which had been gripping thousands of loyal fans for the past few minutes. Jack Stillman leaned back in his seat and reached for his cigarette case.

"Pretty smooth," he said, proffering the case to his companions. "That's what I call pitching out of a hole, and Phil can sure do it to beat the cars."

"Phil?" queried the cub reporter quickly. "Oh, you mean Locke. I keep forgetting that isn't his real name."

"So do I, to tell the truth," returned Stillman, drawing in a lungful of smoke. "He took it on account of his father's prejudice against baseball when he started pitching in the bush last year. When I ran into him this spring in the Hornets' training camp it was hard as the mischief at first to get used to hearing him called anything but Hazelton. I got over that mighty quick, though, and now it's just the other way. Well," he went

on, glancing at Eckstein, "if this doesn't stir the boys up enough to make them hammer out at least one run, they're not the crowd I take them for."

From the way things started, it looked very much as if the newspaper man had gauged the Blue Stockings correctly. After having two strikes called, Dirk Nelson reached for one of Donovan's wide slants, and caught it on the end of his bat for a nice single. The crowd roared, the coachers chattered, and Jack Daly pranced to the plate with every apparent intention of carrying on the good work.

Unfortunately for him, the Specter twirler was not quite ready for the stable. Coolly, and with the consummate skill for which he was famous, he lured Daly into swinging at a deceptive bender, fooled him with a wonderful inshoot, and then, when the batter, grown wary, refused to bite at the doubtful ones, Donovan wound himself up and sent over a curve which cut the heart of the plate.

With two and three called, Daly swung, with all his might. There was a sharp crack, and the ball sailed high in the air, foul back of third base. Dillingham jerked off his mask, and started for it, but Red Callahan's spikes were already drumming the turf as he raced to get under it. Heedless of the shrill taunts and yells with which the fans sought to make him fumble, he fairly flew

over the ground. He made the catch while stretching himself to the utmost, and Daly, flinging down his stick with a muttered exclamation of disgust, slouched toward the bench.

"Never mind that!" cried Grant optimistically. "Only one down, boys. Now, Lefty, old man, get into him! We need a hit. Get off, Dirk! Get going! Drift away from that sack, man! On your toes, now!"

During Daly's turn at bat Nelson had stolen second, beating the catcher's throw by a hair, and now he pranced off the bassock, taking every bit of lead he dared. Twice Kenyon darted behind him, compelling the runner to dive back to the cushion, but each time he was up and off again the instant the ball was returned to Donovan.

Lefty stepped up to the plate and stood swinging his bat gently back and forth. The shouts of the excited fans seemed faint and far away. In reality he heard them clearly, and was young enough to be stimulated a little by this evidence of faith in his ability. But he showed nothing of this. His mind was occupied solely in trying to fathom what Donovan would be likely to hand him.

The first was an outcurve, and he let it pass. The second was high; evidently Donovan was trying to prevent a bunt. The third also seemed high at first, but Lefty's quick eyes saw it begin

to drop as it neared the plate, and he swung at it.

In spite of his swiftness, however, he was a fraction of a second too late. The ball hit his bat glancingly and caromed at right angles. It struck Locke's head with force sufficient to make him stagger backward, the stick slipping out of his relaxed fingers.

A sharp, hissing intake of concern swept over the crowded stands. As Lefty reeled, catcher and umpire both leaped forward with outstretched arms; but their aid was unnecessary. The southpaw was conscious of a single brief instant of blackness, which passed like a lightning flash, leaving him a bit dizzy, but otherwise quite himself.

"I'm all right, Spider," he said quickly, as the Blue Stocking captain rushed up and slipped an arm about him. "It was only a glancing tap."

"Are you sure?" persisted Grant anxiously. "Hadn't you better lay off, and let me run someone else in to bat for you?"

Lefty laughed aloud, and took his stick from Dillingham. "Not on your life!" he retorted emphatically. "Think I'm going to quit *now?*"

As if to prove that the accident amounted to nothing, he shook off the captain's detaining hand, stepping quickly back to the rubber. The fans

shouted their relief and their appreciation of Lefty's nerve. Donovan's face wore a slightly strained look. Though no stretching of the imagination could have laid a shred of blame upon his shoulders, the hitting of a batter often disturbs a pitcher's nerve. This may have had some effect on his next delivery, or may not. At all events, when Locke swung at the ball in fine shape, there was a sharp, clean crack, and the horsehide went humming into the outfield midway between Aldrich and Schwartz.

With a concerted roar, which eclipsed every sound that had gone before, the great mass of people crowding the stands leaped to their feet, and followed with straining eyes the progress of the tiny sphere of white. Away it sped to the right of deep center, both fielders racing like mad to get under it.

Having a big lead to start with, Nelson was off like a streak of light for third. He had crossed the base, and was being urged on down the home stretch before Schwartz snatched up the horsehide, whirled, and sent it whizzing straight toward the plate, with that wonderful sweep of his powerful arm for which he was famous.

It was a perfect throw. For a second or two thousands of hearts stood still, fearing it would be successful. Locke's brain and muscle had

done its work well, however. An instant before the ball plunked into the catcher's waiting mitt Nelson flung himself across the rubber in a cloud of dust, and the umpire shouted:

"Safe!"

CHAPTER VI

A SUMMONS FROM THE MANAGER

LEFTY, having rounded first, pulled himself up abruptly, and trotted toward the clubhouse, the whoops and yells of many thousand delirious baseball "bugs" ringing in his ears. A wave of white-clad players surged after him, but Locke had almost reached the gate before the crest of it overtook him. An expression of happy contentment illumined most of the faces. "Laughing" Larry Dalton, the happy-go-lucky, brown-eyed second baseman, was grinning broadly as he flung one arm over the southpaw's shoulder.

"Pretty punk to-day," he chuckled. "Can't hit, or put the ball over—or anything."

"Perfectly rotten, he is," chimed in Dirk Nelson, still breathing a bit unevenly from his rapid sprint to the plate. "Carson oughta tie the can on him for the rest of the season."

Lefty chaffed back, and the whole crowd, laughing and joshing like a lot of kids, pushed into the clubhouse. As they stripped off their soggy uni-

forms, and scrapped good-naturedly for the showers, they whistled and sang light-heartedly, living over the excitement of those last three innings.

There were one or two exceptions. Some of the Blue Stockings' old guard had viewed Locke's swift rise from the ranks with anything but favor. In their opinion it was up to the busher to scrape along in meek and lowly insignificance for a season or two before he leaped into such scintillating prominence in the galaxy of stars. According to them, to "ripen" and acquire baseball sense he should spend some months sitting on the bench and watching the work of the veterans.

Lefty had upset every precedent. At each added laurel won by the southpaw the old-timers shook their heads dubiously, declaring that such a pace could never last, that success would swell the youngster's head, and making a dozen other pessimistic prophecies, none of which as yet showed signs of coming true.

With the bulk of players Lefty was on the best of terms. He found them a clean, decent crowd of young men, much in love with their profession, somewhat addicted to draw poker and craps as a pastime, but temperate as a rule in most things, generous to a fault, and very likable. Three of them could write letters after their names as well as before, if they chose—which they did not. Some of the others were a bit rough on the sur-

face, perhaps, but deep down underneath were made of the right stuff.

The long, grilling struggle, which began with the opening of the season, had brought them all very close together; and when a crowd of men are fighting shoulder to shoulder day after day, having the same goal, each giving the best that is in him to attain that end, they size up one another's good points and failings with a thoroughness possible under few other conditions.

The new southpaw stood the test well. In spite of his six generous feet of lithe, well-muscled frame, he was still very much of a boy at heart, with a boy's adaptability for making friends and a boy's light-hearted, fun-loving nature.

This did not mean that he lacked the capacity for taking things seriously when the need arose, but he believed thoroughly in relaxing between whiles, and in extracting all possible enjoyment out of life. This trait, helped by a fine baritone voice, quick wit, the ability to "put it over" any member of the club with eight-ounce gloves, and almost as great a skill in coaxing popular airs from the strings of a banjo, made him, within a month, the life of the bunch in Pullmans and hotels on the road, no less than at odd moments of relaxation in the clubhouse at home.

All this was, of course, of small importance compared with his performance on the diamond.

After he had proved his efficiency there, however, by snatching victory from defeat in three or four close contests, the majority of his teammates accepted him without question as one who would "do." The only exceptions were Pete Grist, whose fame as the most reliable member of the Blue Stockings' pitching staff Lefty was rapidly dimming, and three or four old-timers who formed a little clique among themselves.

"Pipe the old crab!" commented Larry Dalton, as he and Lefty raced in from the showers, and began to get into their street clothes. "Some grouch there, believe me!"

Laughing Larry had stepped from a fresh-water college into professional baseball three years before. Being a natural player, he did not stay long with the minors. In Locke he found a kindred spirit, and the southpaw had not been more than two weeks with the Blue Stockings before the two were chumming it as if they had known each other since the bottle days of infancy.

At his friend's remark, Lefty glanced sideways at the scowling pitcher, who was dragging on his clothes in taciturn silence.

"Can't blame him much," he murmured. "If there's anything that makes a fellow feel rottener than getting the hook in a game, it hasn't come my way yet."

"Especially if the man who's put in happens

to be a guy that's made good in the same way before," Dalton grinned.

"Rot!" snorted Lefty, buttoning his shirt. "When Grist's right he can pitch the pants off any man in the club."

"Maybe." Larry's tone was decidedly skeptical. "I haven't noticed him putting anything much over you the last month or more. Trouble with him, he's worrying for fear he'll lose his reputation of being the one and only genuine old reliable; and when a guy starts in with that sort of ragtime, you can be pretty blamed sure—Well, Colonel, what's on your mind?"

"Colonel" George Washington Jones, the Blue Stockings' negro rubber and general handy man, showed his ivories in a glistening smile.

"Mist' Carson says he done laik to see Mist' Locke in his office right smart, suh," he explained.

"All right, Colonel," Lefty returned briefly from where he was struggling with a refractory collar button. "I'll be there in about three minutes."

"Some class there," Dalton murmured, as the darky hurried away. "When Jack wanted a man he'd stick his head in the door and make the fact known. Nothing like that for this bird, though. First thing you know he'll be having a bell boy in brass buttons, and one of those 'Private-no-

admission-except-by-appointment' signs on the door."

From which it may be gathered that the new manager and his methods had not scored a great hit.

Lefty nodded agreement, and went on tying his scarf. From the first Carson had not appealed to him. The man knew baseball from the ground up—there was no questioning that fact. His ability at handling men, however, was much more doubtful.

Most professional ball players have to be managed with infinite tact and judgment, and, though he kept his mouth shut on the subject, Lefty held the opinion that the qualities which had made Jack Kennedy so successful were lacking to a conspicuous degree in his successor. So far the players had betrayed no signs of a let-down, but Locke had noticed a number of insignificant straws, some no greater than the remark of Laughing Larry, which pointed the direction of the wind pretty accurately.

"I'll wait for you," Dalton said, as Locke slipped into his coat and gave it a settling shake. "Cut it as short as you can. Don't forget we've got tickets for the theater to-night."

Nodding, the southpaw picked up his hat and left the dressing room. As he walked briskly toward the manager's office he was wondering

with no little curiosity what was wanted. Carson could scarcely mean to put him into the box to-morrow, after having pitched him ten innings yesterday and three to-day; and aside from that Lefty could think of nothing which would require a special interview.

CHAPTER VII

A GIRL AND THE GIRL

PUSHING open the door in response to a crisp invitation in the manager's familiar voice, Lefty stopped on the threshold, an expression of surprise in his brown eyes. Then he removed his hat, with a swift, graceful movement.

Carson was not alone. The owner of the club, himself, leaned easily against one side of the desk. Seated in a chair on the other side of the room was one of the prettiest girls the young pitcher had ever seen.

Lefty had only time to see that she was very blond and very tiny, with a pair of wonderful deep-blue eyes, which were fixed on his face from the moment the door opened. Then Charles Collier stepped forward, his hand outstretched.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Locke," he said heartily, "for pulling us out of a hole this afternoon. It was especially nervy to keep on at the bat after being hit by that ball."

Lefty smiled as he shook the magnate's hand. "That little knock didn't amount to anything,"

he protested, in his low, pleasant voice. "It only staggered me for a second."

"That was lucky," said Collier. He hesitated, and the pitcher saw his glance flash for a second to the girl in the chair. "This is my daughter," he went on quickly. "Virginia, this is Mr. Locke, whose pitching you were so enthusiastic about."

Lefty, turning swiftly to acknowledge the introduction, saw that the girl had risen to her feet and was holding out her hand impulsively.

"I'm glad indeed to meet you, Mr. Locke," she said, in a pleasant voice, which held an undercurrent of earnestness in it. "I suppose you get very tired of being told how splendid your pitching is, but I can't help it this time." She smiled charmingly. "If you could have any idea how utterly thrilled I was during those last three innings, I'm sure you wouldn't blame me."

Her eyes, with their long, curling lashes, were really very wonderful, and there was a trace of something in their depths which brought a touch of color glowing under Locke's healthy tan.

"You're more than kind, Miss Collier," he returned. "I don't think any man really minds being told that he's done well, but in this case I didn't deserve much credit. You see, Grist held them down for six innings, and when I came in fresh at the seventh we were only one run to the bad. It was still anybody's game."

"How about yesterday?" asked the girl quickly. "I wasn't here, but they tell me you won the game in spite of a lot of errors made by your team."

Lefty shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, that was different. I hadn't pitched before in a week. So I was ready to sail in and massacre them."

Miss Collier shook her head, laughing deliciously. "I'm afraid you're altogether too modest. After this I'll have to trust to someone else for the real facts. All right, dad. I suppose it *is* time we were going. Well, good-by, Mr. Locke. I shall probably see you again. Now that I'm back in town, I don't mean to miss a game."

Lefty murmured his pleasure in courteous, well bred terms, shook hands with her father, and, when they had disappeared into the corridor, stood for a second staring after them. When he turned suddenly back to the manager he surprised on that person's face an expression of distinct annoyance, mingled with disapproval.

"Is that all you wanted?" the southpaw asked briefly.

"Yes," retorted Carson, almost snappily. He hesitated for an instant, and then went on abruptly, his lips curling the least bit: "I s'pose after this you'll go around swelled out of all human form."

There was a decidedly sneering undercurrent in

his voice, rasping Locke's sensibilities, and making it difficult for him to keep from flinging back a sarcastic retort.

"Do you?" he murmured, with tantalizing coolness, as he paused for a second in the doorway. "Perhaps I will. After all, you couldn't blame me very much, you know."

Dalton, waiting in the dressing room, at once asked for details of what had happened in the manager's office. More for sport than any other reason, Lefty kept him on the anxious seat all the way back to the hotel, fully intending to tell him while they were having dinner together. That thought, as well as every other, was driven out of his head, however, by a penciled message the desk clerk handed him as he passed through the lobby.

"Call Miss Harting, at 10224 Morris," it read; and the six commonplace words brought a rush of vivid crimson to the pitcher's face, a sparkle of amazed delight into his eyes.

"Janet in town!" he muttered, as he eagerly sought a telephone booth, leaving Dalton to stare blankly after him. "Well, wouldn't that get you! Not a word about it in her last letter. I suppose she wanted to work a surprise. She's sure put one over, all right."

Hurriedly giving the operator the number, he entered the booth, and, a few minutes later, heard

the familiar tones of the "only girl in the world" clearly over the wire.

Just what they said is neither here nor there. The door of the booth was tightly closed, and if the operator listened she did not betray the fact by a sign. Lefty and Janet Harting, who lived with her father in a thriving New England town, had been very good friends indeed for something more than a year. Though they corresponded with extreme regularity, their positions made actual meetings tantalizingly infrequent. Given these premises, the reader may reconstruct their conversation to suit himself.

Suffice it to say that Janet had come on to the city for a two weeks' visit to an aunt, leaving her father, who was better than he had been in a good many years, in the care of a distant cousin, who had volunteered that office so that the daughter might take a brief vacation. After retailing this information, Miss Harting hinted delicately that she would be at home all evening.

"I'll be there with my hair in a braid!" Lefty returned promptly. Then he stopped abruptly, stung by sudden recollection.

"Sh!" reproved Janet, as a sibilant vibration reached her attentive ears. "On the 'phone, too! What's the matter? Have you thought of an engagement?"

"Beg pardon," apologized Lefty contritely.

"It slipped out. Why, yes. You see, some of the boys planned a little theater party to-night to see 'The Girl from Madrid,' and they've got the tickets. It doesn't matter a bit, though. I'll just tell 'em I can't go."

"You'll do nothing of the sort." Miss Harting's tone was emphatic. "I'm not going to have you breaking engagements and throwing over your friends for me. There's plenty of time. You can come and see me to-morrow."

The young man protested vehemently, but Janet remained quite firm. In the end she had her way, though she compromised to some extent by saying that Lefty could come up the next day and take her out to lunch.

With this the young pitcher had to be content, and, when he came to think it over, he was not wholly sorry. The dinner and theater party had been planned a week before to celebrate Larry Dalton's birthday, and, considering Dalton's peculiar sensitiveness, Lefty would have disliked being reckoned a quitter on account of "a skirt." Besides, Janet would be in town long enough for him to see her many times.

Comforted by this reflection, Locke paid the triple call, made a bee-line for the elevator, and five minutes later was hurrying into his evening clothes.

"Moonlights?" Laughing Larry had chuckled,

when the question of clothes was broached that morning. "You bet! We'll show this bunch of city rounders how things ought to be done, eh?"

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE THEATER

WHEN the quartet piled into a taxi about half past six, and started for an exclusive downtown restaurant, their appearance would have been a revelation to those who picture a professional ball player as a pugnacious, rough-mannered individual who fits in well enough on the diamond but is quite out of his element when he attempts anything in the social line.

It would have been difficult, in fact, to find four finer-looking specimens of manhood anywhere. Their faces glowing with perfect health and physical well-being, they showed not the slightest signs of being awkward or ill at ease in their evening togs. Add to this the fact that two of them, Lefty Locke and Billy Orth, were men of unusual good looks, and it is small wonder that their arrival at the restaurant caused a little stir of interest among the diners already present.

They were swiftly recognized, of course, and the stir increased to a bustle; for even society doesn't often have a chance of studying two

pitchers, the catcher, and second baseman of a national organization at close range. The four athletes, however, paid scant attention to the interest they were exciting. They were too well accustomed to that sort of thing to let it interfere with their enjoyment. They were out for a good time, and meant to have it, regardless of rubbernecks.

There was nothing in the least boisterous in their behavior. They laughed and talked and joshed one another, to be sure, but their manner was not a whit different from that of a dozen other parties about them. They consumed the well-ordered dinner—conspicuous by the absence of anything to drink—leisurely. Then, it being close on to eight, they paid the sizable check, tipped the waiters, and departed, having shown from the beginning a breeding and a refreshing lack of self-consciousness which opened the eyes of not a few observers.

The theater being only a few blocks away, they walked, arriving in the lobby just as the overture was beginning. There was the usual crowd jostling to get in. As the four friends stood waiting for an usher to take their checks, Lefty heard his name called in a slightly familiar voice.

For a second he stared around in a puzzled way, failing to locate the owner of that voice in

the crowd. Dalton's elbow dug into his ribs, and Dalton's voice whispered in his ear:

"The Big Chief! Get busy, kid."

Then it was that Lefty discovered Charles Collier, the distinguished-looking owner of the Blue Stockings, standing near the wall at a little distance; and beside him, more charming than ever in her evening gown of shimmering white, was his daughter, Virginia.

"You're just the man I'm looking for," Collier said, as Lefty stepped swiftly over and bowed his greetings. "See here, boy, is it possible that you're a son of the Reverend Paul Hazelton, who went through Dartmouth and the New York Theological Seminary, and has a parish somewhere out in Jersey?"

Lefty's eyes brightened. "Quite possible," he smiled. "He's been in Summit for the last twelve years. Do you know him?"

"Know him?" echoed Collier emphatically. "I should say I did! Why, we were chums at college, and kept up our friendship for a number of years afterward. I must have been wool-gathering. I knew your name was Hazelton, but somehow the connection never occurred to me till my daughter suggested it at dinner to-night. I suppose it was because I couldn't associate Paul's son with baseball."

"Yes; Dad has a perfect horror of the game. He had a friend who was killed while—"

"Yes, of course. Poor Brandon! It was in our junior year. Your father could never bear even to see a game after that. I must have a chat with you about him soon. Just now I'm—"

He paused abruptly, his eyes roving over the immaculate figure of the young man, and then veering swiftly to his daughter's face.

"By Jove, Virginia!" he exclaimed. "I don't see why Hazelton can't help us out."

Miss Collier's color deepened a trifle and she made a quick, protesting gesture with her white-gloved hands. "How absurd, Dad! Mr. Hazelton is here with friends. I couldn't think of asking such a thing."

"Nonsense!" chuckled the older man. "I don't believe he'll mind shaking them for a little while." He turned to Locke. "I've just had a message from a real-estate man," he explained, "whom I expected to see in the morning. He's got to take the midnight back to Boston, and it's essential that I should talk to him before he goes. Virginia can't very well stay here alone, but if you would take my place—"

"I should be delighted," Lefty said swiftly, as the older man paused questioningly. "The fellows I'm with are just three men from the team."

In reality he was very far from being overjoyed.

but he was much too courteous and well-bred to allow any sign of this to appear in his face or manner. Having given up an evening with Janet to keep his previous engagement, he did not particularly fancy spending it with even so charming a person as Virginia Collier.

Under the circumstances, however, there was nothing to do but accept with the best possible grace the situation forced on him; and, though she was watching him closely, the girl saw nothing in his face but ready acquiescence and well-simulated pleasure.

Collier breathed a sigh of relief, handed over the seat coupons, and departed hastily, with the assurance that he would be back before the performance was ended. Still giving his clever imitation of one in the throes of unalloyed bliss, Lefty explained to his friends, and then escorted Miss Collier down the aisle, conscious as he passed the eighth row of the concentrated stare of three pair of observing eyes. He did not glance round, however, and he was settled in the third-row aisle seat when the curtain began to rise.

Few men can resist a thoroughly charming woman when she sets out deliberately to make herself agreeable. Lefty was not one of the few. Of course, he did not realize that Miss Collier's manner with him was a bit different from what it might have been with any other man.

The girl was much too clever to let him see that. But there are ways *and* ways, most of them too subtle for the clumsy masculine intellect to grasp, which are part of every woman's mental equipment. The result of their application in the present instance was the swift transformation of Lefty's pose of enjoyment into one of reality.

It must not be supposed for an instant that Virginia Collier's manner showed a trace of vulgar coquetry; quite the contrary. Apparently there was no particle of sentimentality in her make-up. She talked mainly of baseball, tennis, motoring, and kindred subjects, in a way which showed that she was more than familiar with her ground; and the contrast between her daintily feminine appearance and her evident liking for almost every sort of sport was very taking—as, no doubt, the young woman fully appreciated.

By the end of the first intermission Lefty felt as if they were old friends. Before the third act had commenced he found himself discussing the baseball situation almost as if she had been "one of the fellows." One did not have to do much explaining. Her grasp on conditions was surprising, her judgment almost flawless. Yet, underneath it all, and ever present as the oft-recurring theme of a symphony, was the lure of feminine personality, stronger, perhaps, for its very subtlety.

Lefty felt its pull, but did not realize the nature of the attraction. He told himself that he had never before met anyone quite like Virginia Collier. She was like a good pal, a chum to whom one could talk almost as one talked to another man. She was a good sport in the best sense of the word, and he was vaguely glad that the real-estate man from Boston had appeared when he did.

Just before the final curtain an usher appeared with a note which Lefty was able to read by the light from the stage. It was hastily scrawled from a near-by club, and in it Charles Collier—explaining that he was still in conference with his business man—requested that Locke escort his daughter home, and then send the car back for him.

"It really isn't a bit necessary," the girl protested, as she glanced at the paper. "If you'll find the motor and put me in, I can manage the rest quite well."

"Then why didn't your father ask me to do just that?" Lefty asked.

"Because he's foolishly silly about my going about at night alone, even in our own machine." Miss Collier paused an instant, and then dimpled charmingly. "You mustn't judge him by his behavior to-night. He's usually annoyingly strict with me. I'm quite sure if you hadn't happened

to be the son of an old college chum I should have been taken home without seeing the play."

The young pitcher laughed. "I'm awfully glad I happened to have the proper credentials, and I think we'd better follow out Mr. Collier's wishes. Besides, if I take you home it will give us a chance to finish that discussion about Marquard's work in the box this year."

"Since you put it that way, I'll give in," the girl said, as she arose to let him place the opera cloak carefully about her shoulders.

Lefty slipped on his coat, secured hat and gloves, and stepped into the aisle. There was the usual crush of people to block the way, and as they moved slowly forward he half turned to make a laughing remark to his companion.

The jesting words were never spoken; the very smile froze on the young man's lips as his eyes fell on the face of a girl in the sixth row over near the boxes.

It was Janet Harting, and there was something about her expression which held Lefty stupidly silent for a second or two. Then he bowed eagerly, and smiled. There was absolutely no response.

For an appreciable moment Miss Harting stared at him, her chin uptilted, her color a little high, perhaps, but her gaze as coldly impersonal as if he had been an utter stranger. She gazed

at him, over him, *through* him, without the quiver of an eyelash. Then she rose leisurely, deliberately turned her back, and began to help her older companion into a coat

CHAPTER IX

"IN BAD"

LEFTY'S face turned a dull red, for in a flash he had realized how intolerable the whole affair must seem to Janet Harting. He had assured her that his engagement at the theater that night was with some of his teammates, yet here she found him the only escort of a very charming young woman, of whose identity she could naturally have no idea.

Moreover, Lefty's being in full dress did not savor altogether of a stag party. Worst of all, the young man remembered, with a sickening sense of irritation, how swiftly he and Miss Collier had come to be on almost chummy terms. An onlooker would never have supposed their acquaintance to be only a few hours old, and Janet had been sitting near enough to miss nothing.

All this passed through Lefty's mind with a rush. For an instant he had an almost uncontrollable impulse to push his way through to Miss Harting's side and explain the innocent facts, which must have looked so condemning. Then he realized how impossible was the time and place

for explanations, and, pulling himself together, moved slowly on toward the entrance.

Miss Collier could scarcely have missed the little incident, swiftly as it had taken place; but apparently she was possessed of tact, along with a number of other good qualities, for she made not the slightest reference to it. During the ride uptown she chatted unconcernedly on various topics, but it must be confessed that she had to uphold the burden of conversation; about nine-tenths of Lefty's mind was taken up with a consideration of his predicament, and with planning a way out of it.

"Thank you a thousand times, Mr. Locke," Miss Collier said, when the car had stopped and he had helped her out. "I've had a perfectly splendid evening."

"It's been corking," Lefty returned, trying to force a little enthusiasm into his voice. "I'm the one who should be thanking you."

"I don't believe it," smiled the girl, holding out her hand. "Have Pagdon drive you wherever you want to go. Dad won't want him yet, I'm sure. Come and see me some time when you haven't anything better to do. We'll finish our talk about Marquard. Good night."

Without giving him time to answer she ran lightly up the steps to the already open door, which closed quickly upon her slim, graceful fig-

ure, leaving Locke to return slowly to the limousine, give the address of his hotel to the chauffeur, and step frowningly in.

"What a thundering jackass I am!" he muttered, leaning back against the leather cushions. "Why in Heaven's name didn't I cut out the party and go see Janet in spite of everything? How the deuce did I know that Collier was going to rope me into a game like that, though—or that Janet would be there to misconstrue everything? I s'pose she went to get a glimpse of me. Well, the sooner I chase up there and explain things to her the better. I wonder if it's too late to go to-night?"

He glanced at his watch. It was decidedly too late.

"I'll hike up the first thing in the morning," he thought. "She'll understand that I couldn't do anything else under the circumstances."

There was some comfort in the reflection that Janet had plenty of sound common sense in that shapely little head of hers. Nevertheless, the more he thought of it, the more Lefty realized what a scurvy trick fate had played him.

"It certainly must have looked bad," he admitted to himself as the car stopped before the hotel. "I wouldn't blame any girl for getting up on her ear."

In the lobby he was met by his three deserted

companions, who instantly let fly a Gatling fire of comment.

"Horning in with the management, are you?" grinned Nelson. "Just the same, I like your taste, kid. Some class there, all right!"

"You bet!" chimed in Billy Orth. "What do you want to be such a hog for, though? Might have given somebody else a chance with one of 'em."

"Spilled the beans that time, old man," Dalton added significantly. "Hard luck, boy. Who'd ever have thought the other one would turn up that way, and pinch you—"

"Oh, go to blazes, the lot of you!" snapped Lefty, his face crimson.

Without another word he strode toward the elevator, leaving Dalton—who had met Miss Harting in Boston, and shrewdly guessed that there was something more than passing friendship between the two—eying his companions with lifted brows.

"Our genial southpaw seems somewhat peeved," Larry murmured. "Have we touched upon a raw spot unawares?"

Orth yawned. "Must be in a pretty bad way," he commented. "I never knew him to give up like that without a word to say. Let's hit the hay; I'm sleepy."

Rather silently the others followed him toward

the elevator. Though there were no further remarks on the subject, they were all wondering what had happened to make the usually quick-witted, even-tempered Locke flare up the way he had at a little good-natured joshing, which ordinarily would have brought forth nothing more than a grin and a retort in kind.

The object of their solicitude was thinking pretty much the same thing. He had scarcely set foot in the elevator before he regretted that silly burst of temper.

"Looks as if I was bound to make a fool of myself to-night," he thought. "I reckon I'm in bad all around."

He did not sleep well, and was up early. Having hurried through his breakfast, he dawdled around with a newspaper until eight o'clock, and then sought the telephone booth. A woman's voice—Janet's aunt, no doubt—answered his call.

"Is Miss Harting in?" he asked quickly.

"Who is this, please?"

"Mr. Hazelton. I won't keep her for more—"

"I'm sorry," interrupted the voice, with a curt, crisp intonation which belied the words, "but Miss Harting is too busy to come to the telephone."

"Will she be at home— Hang it all! She's cut off."

Lefty slammed up the receiver, and sat scowling for a moment at the instrument.

"Might think I'd committed a crime," he growled at last. "Won't even give me a chance to say a word in my own defense." His jaw squared stubbornly. "I'll make her listen to me," he went on. "I'll go up there and see her, whether she's at home or not. I'll go now, too."

This was easier said than done. Emerging from the booth, Lefty was waylaid by Spider Grant, captain of the team, who wasted a good half hour in desultory discussion of their chances for winning the third game of the series from the Specters that afternoon. It might have continued for an hour and a half had not Locke departed unceremoniously in the very midst of one of Spider's most elaborate arguments.

"If hot air would win the game, we wouldn't need to go out to the park," he muttered grumpily as he leaped aboard an open car.

Of course there was a block; equally of course, Lefty fretted and fumed and wasted his good energy and invention in uncomplimentary remarks about the road and its operators. He was compelled to walk the last twelve blocks. When he at last arrived at the apartment house his mental condition was far from enviable.

"Not at home," said the maid, with cool brevity.

As she started to close the door Lefty placed one foot over the sill, with apparent carelessness.

His earnestness of purpose was dimming the brightness of his manners.

"Are you sure?" he asked suspiciously. "I only want to see Miss Harting for a minute."

"Indeed!" sniffed the girl. "Well, you'll have to wait some time before you get the chance. She and Mrs. Manning are leaving on the night train for the Adirondacks."

"The Adirondacks!" gasped Lefty. "To-night!" He stood staring at the maid for a moment in utter dismay. "But I *must* see them before they go. Haven't you any idea where they are now?"

"No more'n a fly," returned the girl, evidently softened a little by his distress. "They went right after the trunks was took—shoppin', I s'pose. Anyhow, Mrs. Manning said they wouldn't be back."

How Lefty went through the rest of the morning he did not know. What had been started by a trivial trick of chance seemed to be growing more serious every moment. Evidently Janet believed the worst of him. It was equally evident that she was determined to give him no opportunity to explain the mix-up. Her behavior hurt Lefty desperately. It seemed unfair and unjust that she should have so little faith in him, in spite of appearances.

For several hours he wandered about the shop-

ping district, in the vague hope that somehow he might run across the girl. Failing in that, he lunched in gloomy solitude, then made his way to the ball park.

For six innings he sat on the bench in grim silence while "Slick" Lumley held down the Specters to a shut-out score. Slick was one of those pitchers who are unsurpassed when they are good, but who seldom last through an entire game. Evidently Carson did not propose to run any chances of his blowing up this time, for at the beginning of the seventh, with Lumley showing sudden wildness, he took him off the mound and substituted Billy Orth.

It was during that inning that Lefty got up from the bench to stretch his legs, and became aware for the first time of the presence of Miss Collier in the box with her father. She nodded cordially, and it seemed only natural for him to step up and say a few words to her.

The few words lengthened into a prolonged conversation. The club owner had a good many questions to ask about Lefty's father, and Virginia herself was so bright and cheery and interesting that the young pitcher was raised from the depths of despondency in spite of himself.

For three innings he stood leaning against the rail of the box. Toward the end he was talking and laughing almost as if he hadn't a thing on his

mind to worry him. Several times his glance wandered back into the stands to where sat a young man of about his own age, who seemed much more interested in the party in the box than in the game. The fellow's expression was so bitter, and he stared so fixedly at the famous southpaw, that Lefty wondered if he had ever met the chap before, or whether it was simply one of those curious dislikes certain fans seem to take to a player every once in a while.

Locke was still wondering when Orth struck out the last man, winning the game by a score of two to one, and the crowd began to pour out of their seats to jam the aisles and runways.

The next second Lefty gave a start, and the color drained swiftly from his face. He had caught a brief, fleeting glimpse of a girl who had been seated well back in the lower stand. Her face had been invisible all through the game, but now, as she arose and stepped into the aisle, he saw it clearly for an instant before she was swallowed up in the mob. It was the face of the girl he had been seeking all day in vain.

Before he realized what he was doing, he had leaped for the nearest gate, and swung it open. Then he stopped, with a groan. It would be like hunting a needle in a haystack to try and find her in this crush. She might leave at any of a dozen exits before he could reach even one of them.

For a moment he stood there, a scowl on his face, bitterness in his heart. Why had she come to the grounds at all? Was it to see him without the chance of being seen? Well, she had accomplished her purpose with a vengeance; she had beheld him chatting and laughing intimately with the same girl she supposed he had taken to the theater last night.

With a groan of disappointment and mental pain, Lefty whirled around and tramped sullenly across the field toward the clubhouse. He did not give a single backward glance at the charming Miss Collier. He had forgotten her very existence in the irritation and trouble which this new complication had brought upon him.

CHAPTER X

THE GROUCH

A MODERN Big League team is very much like an overgrown family. The men are together every day, and all day. At intervals they spend long hours cooped up in Pullman cars, always putting up at the same hotels while on the road, and frequently the majority of players belonging to a club stop at one particularly favored place at home. They miss little going on about them. As a result of this intimacy it was not long before Locke's altered demeanor became a topic of discussion among the Blue Stockings.

"I'd like to know what's worrying the boy," remarked Spider Grant early one afternoon in the dressing room. "He's been going round for three or four days with a face a mile long."

He paused in his leisurely preparations for the game, and glanced inquiringly from one to another of the half dozen men who lounged about the room in various stages of undress.

"He's sure got a grouch," agreed Rufe Hyland, intent on the adjustment of his sliding pads.

"Ain't seen him crack a smile in so long I've forgot what he looks like grinnin'. Mebbe he's peeved at the way Carson's been runnin' him in at the tail end of games to pull us out of holes. Bein' a life-saver an' gettin' no credit's enough to get any man raw."

"That's true enough," agreed Grant. "He hasn't had a whack at a straight game for over a week. Still, that wouldn't turn a decent fellow like Lefty into a chronic grouch; he's got too much sense. No, he acts to me like he was in love, and his girl had given him the double cross or something. How about that, Larry? You ought to know."

Dalton, wearing little more than his usual smile, shrugged his muscular shoulders and bustled among the contents of his locker.

"Wouldn't wonder if you'd hit it, Spider," he returned, straightening up with a flannel shirt in his hands. "He has got a girl—regular peacherino, too—and I've got an idea that she has cross-signaled him lately. He spends half his time writing letters, and tears most of 'em up. That's a bad sign, you know."

"Huh!" growled Hyland. "This skirt business makes me sick. There ain't a thing in it. I've been hitched twice, and divorced the same number—an' never again. I wouldn't make sheep's eyes at the best-lookin' dame in this town, believe me

They git a fellow so fussed that he don't know whether he's afoot or horseback. If some female's throwed the kid down, an' that's what he's grouchin' about, take it from me he'll be bustin' up on the mound one of these days—an' then where'll he come off at?"

"Where'll *we* come off, you mean," retorted Grant, with a frown. "He's the best all-round flinger in this outfit, and if he goes to seed then go-o-od night post-season series."

There being no other pitchers present, the statement passed uncontradicted. Grant slipped out of his street trousers, carefully folded them, and turned again to Dalton.

"Can't you find out if that's it, Larry?" he asked. "If it is, we ought to do something to—"

"Cheese! Cheese!" warned Kid Lewis. "Here he comes."

A moment later the young southpaw entered the dressing room, curtly responded to jovial greetings—somewhat forced—from the other men, and strode over to his locker. His forehead was corrugated by the frown which had become habitual of late. His eyes were somber. He made no attempt whatever to join in the conversation which swiftly started up again, seeming, in fact, to be almost oblivious to what was going on. He answered two or three direct questions in monosyllables, stripped off his clothes with an absent sort

of haste, got into his uniform in much the same manner, and departed, wrapped in gloom, without having volunteered a single remark.

As he disappeared into the corridor, the other players eyed each other significantly.

"I never thought to see Lefty Locke with a face like that on him," commented Dirk Nelson mournfully. "Why, the boy used to be the life of the whole crowd."

"If it *is* a girl who's responsible," growled Hyland viciously, "she'd ought to be masse-creed. There ain't a woman livin' that's worth makin' all that fuss about."

Spider Grant finished lacing his shoes, and stood up, stamping.

"Try if you can't get wise to the game, Larry," he said abruptly. "I don't know as we can do anything, but it'll be something to be sure. He'll loosen up to you sooner'n to any of the rest of us."

Dalton agreed, but without any great exhibition of confidence. He had noticed a marked reserve on the part of Lefty Locke lately, which did not augur well for the extraction of confidences. There was a little more talk on the subject, but it ceased with the arrival of Pete Grist and his bunch of cronies. Soon afterward they all sauntered out to the diamond.

The game that day was the last of a series

with the Hornets, and the last which would be played on the home grounds for some time. That night would see the Blue Stockings bound for the territory of their greatest rivals, the Specters, after which would follow the final Western circuit.

Either the home club had weakened, or the Hornets improved noticeably since their last encounter. The Blue Stockings had won every game, to be sure, but they had won them only by the hardest kind of work; and on two occasions the phenomenal pitching of Locke, put into the box for two and four innings respectively, was all that saved the day.

To the fans it seemed a certainty that the young southpaw would start off on the mound to-day, and a murmur of surprise arose when the umpire announced "Pink" Dillon's name.

Dillon was, at times, a brilliant pitcher, but he had been on the sick list for some weeks; and the manager's mistaken judgment was proved by the fact that he lasted for just two innings, during the last of which the Hornets succeeded in pounding out three runs.

In spite of vociferous yells for Locke on the part of the bleacherites, Carson sent Grist into the box. He lasted until the end of the seventh. Then, owing in part, perhaps, to the carping criticism from a group of leather-lunged fans, to

whom nobody but Lefty Locke looked good, he made a sudden and pyrotechnic ascension which let in several more tallies.

Lefty was hurried into the gap with the score eight to three against the home team, and, though the portsider kept the Hornets from further scoring, the Blue Stockings were able to get only two more runners across the rubber. Therefore the game was lost by a tally of eight to five.

The tramp and thunder of departing thousands had been going on for several minutes, yet Miss Collier still sat in a box, her eyes fixed on the throng of white-clad players just disappearing through the fence on the farther side of the field. All afternoon the young southpaw had not so much as glanced in her direction, yet to-night he was leaving the city, to be gone for several weeks. It seemed as if he might at least have said good-by.

"I wouldn't take it so hard if I were you," smiled Mr. Collier, turning away from the friend with whom he had been chatting. "We can afford to lose this game, you know. The boys will make it up when they meet the Specters."

The girl arose leisurely and turned her back on the field.

"I wasn't thinking of that," she said quietly. She paused for a second, her slim, gloved hands straightening her hat. "Doesn't it seem a little

odd to you, Dad, that Mr. Locke pitches so few games?"

"Few!" repeated the magnate in amazement. "Why, he's been in the box twice this week, and twice last!"

Miss Collier shrugged her shoulders gracefully. "Precisely," she returned calmly. "He's been in the box for anywhere from two to four innings. Three times out of those four he won games some other pitcher tried to lose. He pitched a full game the day before I got home. Since then he's been doing the most thankless sort of relief work. You see my point?"

Mr. Collier's jaw dropped. "Well, I'll be hanged!" he exclaimed. "You certainly put one over on me that time, Virginia—or was it Locke who put you wise?"

"Certainly *not*," the girl retorted emphatically. "He isn't that sort at all."

"Hum! No, of course not. I'm very glad you mentioned this, my dear. Such a thing is neither fair to the boy nor good judgment. I'll see Carson before he leaves to-night, and tell him a little something."

CHAPTER XI

ON THE RAW EDGE

THE train had been in motion for twenty minutes or so, and the occupants of the Blue Stocking special car were beginning to settle down for the evening when Al Carson appeared in the doorway of his stateroom. For a moment or two he stood there, frowning, his glance passing indifferently over the brisk poker game with its several interested onlookers which was going on near him, past the lounging players engaged in idle talk or immersed in newspapers. There was a sudden tightening of his lips, however, as his eyes finally came to rest on the sprawling figure of Lefty Locke, hunched in the corner of a seat well forward. A moment later the manager stood looking down on the southpaw, with narrowing lids.

"Been whining around a petticoat, have you?" he sneered.

Lefty's eyes veered suddenly from the window to the manager's face.

"What's that?" he snapped.

"I said you'd been whining around a skirt,

complaining that I was using favoritism with the pitchers. You weren't man enough to put up your kick to me; you had to go bawling about it to Collier's daughter, so she'd work her father—"

"That's a lie!" rasped Locke, his face crimson. "A lie, and you know it!"

His eyes were flashing, his fists were doubled; every muscle of his big frame had suddenly become tense and hard as a panther's crouching for a spring. The manager himself turned suddenly livid with anger. For a moment, to the three or four players sitting near enough to observe what was going on, it looked as if another second would bring about a rough-and-tumble scrap.

Just in time, however, Carson, realizing the danger of the situation, managed to get control of his temper.

"*Is* that so?" he sneered. "Perhaps you can explain how Miss Collier came to draw the old man's attention to the fact that you hadn't pitched a straight game in over a week."

"Not being a fool," Lefty snapped back, "it's quite possible she discovered it by simple observation. Everybody else is wise to the fact that ever since you took hold of the team you've been using me to win games for the precious pitcher you're so stuck on."

Carson caught his breath swiftly and turned white with rage. "What the deuce—" he blustered. "Who—"

"You know well enough who I mean," retorted Locke. "If you don't, then ask any man on the team, and you'll find out quick. I'm not kicking; I'm simply stating facts. You're manager of this team, and you've got the right to run it any way you choose. But there's just this, *Mister* Carson: in future we'll dispense with any more talk about my currying favor with the owner, either through his daughter or in any other way. When I'm ready to kick about anything, I'll come to you and do it. Believe me, you'll know it!"

"What do you mean by such talk?" frothed Carson, his face purple. "I'll fine you—"

"Fine and be hanged!" defied Locke. "Only shut up! You started this, not I. You asked a question, and I answered, so cut out the hot air and leave me alone. I'm sick of the sound of your voice."

For a second or two the manager stared in dazed fury at the scowling face of the young pitcher, and then—he wilted. Lefty's remarks had hit the nail on the head only too accurately, and Carson knew it. He and Pete Grist had been on friendly terms for a number of years, and Grist had been favored by the manager at

every opportunity, though Carson flattered himself that it had been done too skillfully to be obvious. The shock of discovering the contrary, and also the realization that Locke was apparently in a state of mind which necessitated handling with gloves, caused the official to back water. With a snappy retort or two, and a very fierce expression, he turned on his heel and sought the seclusion of his stateroom.

The slamming of the door was followed by a hush more eloquent than many words. The altercation had been conducted with no soft pedal on, and almost every word had been audible the entire length of the car. For a few minutes even the poker game was in abeyance, as the men glanced significantly at one another with lifted eyebrows, shaking their heads.

"He's sure enough sore," whispered Kid Lewis. "Maybe it isn't the girl, after all."

"Mebbe," agreed Rufe Hyland, glancing at his cards again. "Lucky Grist's in the smoker, or there'd be a rough-house for fair."

"What he said was nothing but gospel," protested Nelson. "Carson's been favoring Pete every chance he got. Lefty won two games for him within a week, and didn't get any credit; for Grist, going to the bad, was drawn with us leadin' by a run."

"Oh, sure! I know that. But Petie's a pep-

pery gink, and no fellow likes to hear that kind of truth blabbed out in so many words."

Of course, Grist heard all about it before many hours had passed. In the dressing room on the Specter grounds, next afternoon, he made some sneering remarks on the subject in a loud tone, which could not help reaching Locke's ears. Instantly Lefty retorted savagely. Grist snapped back viciously, and but for the swift interference of the other men, there would have been a fight then and there.

Five minutes later Carson appeared and curtly informed the southpaw that he was to start the game.

It was in this mental condition that Lefty received instructions to pitch. He made no comment beyond a surly nod, but his teammates glanced dubiously at one another, and shook their heads.

One and all were conscious of an unpleasant feeling of suspense and unrest. It was as if they were walking on the thin crust of a volcano which was likely at any moment to burst into violent eruption.

CHAPTER XII

UNCERTAINTY

CONTRARY to the fears of a good many Blue Stockings, Lefty still seemed to be "there with the goods." To be sure, he stalked out to the mound with a gloomy face and wrinkled brow, which was the very antithesis of his usual cheerful, good-humored expression; but when it came to bending them over, he showed every bit of his old-time skill for the first three innings.

It was in the fourth that Larry Dalton, who had been watching his friend closely, began to notice a change. Red Callahan, an uncertain hitter, was at the bat. The southpaw pulled him with a pretty outcurve, following with a clever drop; and then, with two strikes and only one ball called, he whipped over a fast, straight ball, which would have cut the heart of the plate had not Red fallen upon it joyfully, smashing it out for a canter to first.

It was not a very bad slip; pitchers fail every day through underestimation of a poor hitter. But carelessness had never been one of Lefty's

faults, and Dalton's eyes widened with surprise as the Specter infielder romped down to the initial sack, and stood there grinning.

The look of surprise deepened on Larry's face when Locke gave the next batter three balls in succession, meanwhile allowing Callahan to steal second.

"That's the game!" barked the Specter coachers jubilantly. "Make him put 'em over, Jack. He ain't such a wonder, after all. Too bad, Lefty, old boy. Losing your control?"

"Make those dubs shut up!" snapped Locke, turning to the umpire. "They can talk to their own men, but not to me."

The coachers received a perfunctory warning, and naturally, when they saw that the pitcher objected to their remarks, they redoubled their efforts, simply altering the person.

Dalton could scarcely believe his ears. To think of Lefty Locke being bothered by a little hot air! Ordinarily he simply grinned aggravatingly, or gave an excellent imitation of a deaf mute. It seemed incredible, and a furrow of anxiety flashed into place between Larry's brown eyes.

Lefty managed to pull out of the hole, but the mere fact that he had allowed himself to get into it was enough to cause his teammates to worry.

The fifth inning passed with the score still one

to one—both runs had been made at the very beginning of the game. In the sixth the Blue Stockings scored another tally, a lead which they held in spite of the desperate efforts of their opponents in the final half of the inning.

During the seventh and eighth Lefty's pitching came near giving a number of people heart failure. It was by turns mediocre to a degree, and superbly brilliant. He would get himself into holes by inexcusable carelessness, and then, when he seemed on the point of blowing up, he would steady down and make the spectators shout joyous approval.

Throughout this erratic performance Billy Orth sat on the bench, watching the work of the grim, frowning portsider with alternate dismay, delight, and wonderment.

"Good Lord!" Billy muttered to himself. "I never saw him so shifty. First he's careless and wild as a hawk, then, just when he seems going up for fair, he tightens like a drumhead. He's got Carson squirming."

True, the manager of the Blue Stockings was squirming. Even when Locke fanned dangerous hitters in the pinches Carson, though showing some relief, did not look wholly happy. At no time was the angry frown wiped clean from his face. For through it all he was troubled by a nagging conviction that the man on the mound

was playing on his feelings as well as toying with the opposing batters.

It really seemed that Lefty invited and sought threatening situations—in any of which the slightest slip would give the Specters what they desired—in order that he might make a display of his skill by balking the enemy when they were almost grasping the coveted prize. A pitcher who could "monkey" in such a manner, with the result of a single game meaning so much, was not worthy of trust under any circumstances. Had Carson felt absolutely assured that Locke was doing this, he would have braved the wrath of the owner by benching the man in one of those tense, threatening moments.

But Carson was not sure. Much as he disliked Lefty for certain reasons, he could not bring himself to believe that a youngster with Locke's promise in the Big League would, through malice or spite, toy inanely with his future prospects.

Nevertheless, even when Lefty succeeded in pulling himself out of the holes, and came to the bench amid the approving uproar of the great crowd, the manager could not bring himself to give the grim and sullen man a word of encouragement and approval. True it was that Locke did not invite anything of the sort, and actually seemed, by his cold and distant manner, to repel the advances of his own friends and intimates

on the team. In every way he was thoroughly unlike the open, jovial, likable youngster he had seemed to be earlier in the season.

Even Laughing Larry, than whom no one had been more intimate with the young southpaw, wore an expression of troubled anxiety each time he came to the bench following those pinches.

Billy Orth saw this, and signaled for the perspiring, disturbed Dalton to sit beside him in the pit.

"What's the matter with Lefty, Dalt?" asked Orth guardedly. "Do you think—"

"Dunno what to think," muttered Larry, in a perplexed way; "but I don't believe he's right. The whole team feels it, too; and, with our slim margin of one run, it wouldn't take only the smallest break to put the bunch off their feet."

"Of course you've noticed how queer he's been acting the last few days?"

"Huh! Couldn't help noticing it. A blind man or a fool could see that. He seems to be sore with himself and the whole world generally. That quarrel with Carson didn't improve his condition any. He's in bad there."

"But he stands well with the skirt, and she seems to be the real power behind the machine."

"The skirt? Oh, you mean Collier's daughter?"

"Sure! She seems to be running things."

Dalton shook his head soberly. "And that's unfortunate. Women may vote, hold office, and go to war if they want to, but baseball is one thing they'd better keep their noses out of. No team ever did well with a female monkeying with it."

"Do you know," murmured Billy, "I've got an idea that I can locate Lefty Locke's weak spot. It's skirts. We all have our failings, and that's his."

"Perhaps you're right," nodded Larry. "I've always thought he had a level block, till lately. Now he's mixed up with two dames, and—"

"Why don't you talk to him, Larry? You're the one to do it. He ought to listen to you."

"Maybe he ought to listen, but he won't. Once I wouldn't have hesitated, but now I can't open my face to him without his being ready to jump down my throat. I confess it has made me a bit raw, too. Once he had plenty of friends, but if he keeps on he will lose the sympathy of everybody."

"I'm afraid you're right," admitted Billy sadly. "I've been figuring to get my fingers on some of that post-season money, but if Locke goes to pieces now we won't be in the running at the wind-up. Let's hope for the best."

CHAPTER XIII

SUSPENSE

THE Specter twirler having become practically unhittable, the ninth inning gave the Blue Stockings nothing further than their slim lead of one tally. The final half opened with Dutch Schwartz, leading the Specter's list, the first man to face Locke.

"Whiff him, Lefty!" begged a few fans. "You can do it! Oh, you Lefty! You're the boy!"

With an expression of mingled determination and disdain for these pleading rooters, Schwartz planted himself at the plate, having first knocked the dirt out of his spikes with the butt of his heavy club.

"Take it easy, son," called Spider Grant, getting into position to cover plenty of territory in the vicinity of first. "You know him. If you can get him to start with, it will be as good as two down."

Locke gave his captain a cold stare, and his lips moved. It seemed that he muttered some sullen retort, but Grant could not distinguish the words.

So long did the pitcher stand in that position, gazing straight at Spider, that the tense crowd began to wonder, and the umpire called "Play" twice. Finally, lifting his "meat hand" with the soiled horsehide gripped in his fingers, Lefty turned his eyes on Nelson, who crouched promptly, and signaled.

Wagging his bat loosely, almost lightly, Dutch Schwartz was in position to step into anything handed up. Possibly delaying in an effort to get the batter's nerve, Lefty made no further move until he provoked a protest from the Specter captain. Then, like one awaking from a half trance, the pitcher balanced himself on one foot, swung far back, brought his body over and forward, and made the delivery. Never had anyone present witnessed a wilder pitch. It was a wonder that the ball did not go clean over the top of the grandstand.

"Oh, oh, oh!" shouted the coachers, while the startled crowd broke into exclamations. "Look a' that! Get a scaling ladder, Schwartzy."

The Dutchman grinned and tapped the pentagon with the end of his bat.

A boy recovered the ball and threw it to Nelson, who made a pretense of looking it over before he tossed it to Locke.

On the bench the watchful Billy Orth, actually shivering, whispered to himself: "Now, I won-

der if he did that on purpose—I wonder. It doesn't seem likely. If he did, he's getting to be a good subject for the foolish factory."

Others beside Billy were wondering. While they were thus engaged Locke pitched again. This time he whipped a smoker over, and Schwartz fouled it against the right-field bleachers.

"That makes you even, old boy!" called Grant, ere he turned to receive the ball from the fielder who had chased it down. But, somehow, his voice seemed to lack the ring of genuine cheerfulness.

Even the least astute spectator could see that the Blue Stockings were all keyed up to a point of tension little short of snapping. Something in the very air seemed to presage a break. And that meant—disaster.

It was such a situation, however, as provides one of the intense thrills of the game, the sort of a thrill and suspense which makes it so fascinating to its thousands upon thousands of followers. It is the desire to feel just this keen distress and uncertainty, intensely delicious in its poignant pain, that lures a fan to the ball park day after day to witness dead and uninteresting games, hoping always for the pinch that will set them swallowing hard to keep their hearts from choking them.

Frowning, Lefty pitched again. The ball seemed to make a yellow streak through the air, and Nelson, though he held it, was actually set back the least fraction by the terrific impact of the sphere in his big mitt.

Schwartz had struck again—and missed.

"Smoke! Smoke!" shouted Dalton, laughing suddenly in his old-time way. "He couldn't see it, my boy! Once more, and you've got him!"

Indeed, Laughing Larry had suddenly decided that the pitcher he had doubted might be playing a clever game, even though the wisdom of it could be questioned. Nor was Larry the only one with confidence suddenly revived.

"Such speed!" muttered Billy Orth. "And his control was perfect—that time."

"That's two on him!" howled an excited man from the middle stand. "He's your meat, Lefty! You never did fail us!"

Nelson gave his tingling bare hand a shake and returned the ball to Locke, who seemed to perceive it just in time to thrust out his gloved right and catch it a bit awkwardly. They saw him shake his head from side to side with a queer motion and pass the back of his left hand across his sweat-moistened forehead. His face was drawn into hard, set lines, which seemed like lines of pain. Before looking again for Nelson's signal,

he walked all the way around the slab, staring down at the ground as if seeking for something he had dropped. And these queer movements brought the uncertainty leaping back into the heart of Laughing Larry and others.

There was speed in the next one—speed enough, it is true; but Schwartz could not have reached it had his bat measured two feet more than it did. It went past Nelson, and clean to the stand, from which it rebounded.

"Wait it out, Dutch," urged a coacher. "He'll hand you a pass yet."

Schwartz knew how to wait, as he proved by ignoring the next pitch, which barely failed to cut a corner. Three balls were called—three balls and two strikes.

Again Lefty gave his head that queer, side-swaying shake. His teeth were set and his lips drawn back. Receiving the ball, he held it gripped tightly in both hands beneath his chin, while he leaned forward to get the catcher's sign.

Upon the crowd fell a great hush, in the midst of which the voices of Locke's teammates, calling encouragement, could be distinctly heard. Schwartz, his confidence apparently unmarred, waited, sturdily alert.

Lefty nodded, swung backward, swung forward, slashed the air with his arm—pitched. It

was a hook-curve, sharp, and breaking toward the outside corner. Schwartz swung his bat as if it weighed no more than a toothpick. But, marvelous hitter though he was, that curve fooled him, and he was out.

CHAPTER XIV

A WILD HEAVE

CHAMPIONSHIP prospects for the Blue Stockings had led an unusual number of rooters for the team to follow it around on the short jumps, and now, with the fanning of Schwartz, they made a tremendous racket. The following batters might be equally dangerous, but, with the sturdy Dutchman disposed of, the prospect of holding the threatening Specters was bright indeed. Not a few felt, like Larry Dalton, that to get Schwartz at this time was as good as disposing of two men.

As Bugs Murray took Schwartz's place, however, the great bulk of the gathering howled for a safety.

"Get a hit! Get a hit!" was the cry. "Put us in the game, Bugs!"

"He's just as easy, Lefty, old boy," chuckled Dalton. "Sew it up right here. This game counts. We need it."

By no visible sign did Locke show that the words of his friend reached his ears. On the

other hand, the rooting of the immense crowd in the stands seemed to annoy him in a most unusual way. And when one individual, with a voice like a locomotive whistle, shrieked that he was "wild," "no good," "easy," and "punk," he remained for some moments staring at the spot from which the cries seemed to come.

"Don't mind that, old man," pleaded Grant. "You know what you can do. Bugs is your next victim. Mow him down."

Again the troubled pitcher seemed to lack control, for he handed up two wild ones that made Nelson stretch himself to pull them down. Again the coachers prophesied that he would be obliging enough to give the hitter a walk. It is likely Murray thought there was a good prospect of such a thing, for he held back when Locke, after a seeming struggle to pull himself together, shot one down the groove.

"Strike-ah!" called the umpire, flinging up his hand.

"Why, of course, of course!" whooped Dalton. "You've got him hypnotized, Lefty. No free passes this inning."

But Laughing Larry was mistaken. With Murray waiting confidently, the laboring southpaw was unable to find the pan again, and four balls sent Bugs capering with elephantine grace to first.

"Going up! going up!" he whooped, doing a dance on the sack. "Wait it out, Dil. He's all shot to pieces."

After glancing toward his manager for a signal, Dillingham dropped one of the two bats he had been swinging, and hastened to put himself into position to do a little business with the other one.

Logie, fourth on the list, and therefore a most reliable club swinger, followed Dillingham. And Logie was the only man who, all through the game, had shown the ability to fathom anything Locke put within his reach. With this fact in mind, the Specter manager felt that, even though two should be down, and a runner on second, with Logie batting it meant an even chance to get the run which would tie the score.

"If we can tie it up now," he thought, "we've got that left-hander's goat. He's barely been holding himself together, and a tie score in this inning would scatter him all over the lot."

So Dillingham was given the signal to sacrifice, and he passed the sign to Murray, who ceased his capering and made ready to tear up the chalk line on the way to second.

Like the shouting of the crowd, the antics of Murray had seemed to disturb Lefty, and when he threw once to drive Bugs back to the initial sack he made such a wild heave that Spider Grant

pulled the ball down only by a most amazing leap into the air.

"Wow! wow!" laughed the coacher at that base. "He made you stretch, Spider. He can't even throw to the sacks. What's the matter with him—struck by 'stigmatism?"

There really seemed that there was something the matter with Locke's eyes, for again and again he passed his hand across them, like one brushing away cobwebs.

The restored confidence of his teammates was ebbing again. Several times during the game Grant had wondered why Carson sent no other twirler out to warm up, and now the puzzling question once more flashed through his mind. With the former manager at the helm, the captain would have suggested such a precaution, but Carson was not popular with Spider.

"He knows so much about the inside game," thought Grant, "let him run things all by his lonesome. I'll handle my end on the field, but I'm not going to give him a chance to call me by proposing something he ought to be wise to himself."

And only for what he had heard from Collier, Carson would have replaced Locke with another pitcher long ere this. With such feelings governing the "powers," there was really small chance for the Blue Stockings to snatch the coveted cham-

pionship. Indeed, it was just this sort of childishness that had prevented Carson from becoming a pennant contender on the occasions when he had managed other Big League teams. The thoroughly successful manager never permits personal feelings or whims to influence his judgment.

Although Lefty's first pitch to Dillingham would have been called a ball, the batter reached across and met it, with his club loosely held, rolling a soggy bunt into the diamond.

Murray had started with the swing of the pitcher's arm, and therefore there was no chance to get him at second. It was Locke's ball to field, and he should have nailed Dillingham at first by twelve or fifteen feet. Somehow, he seemed to hesitate before starting after the rolling sphere, and then, when he did get it, with barely enough time to pinch the runner at the initial sack, he threw all the way into deep right.

A sudden roar went up. The coacher at first shrieked for Dillingham to keep on. The one at third howled and waved his arms at Murray.

Uttering one gasping snarl, Rufe Hyland chased that wild peg down, got it on the rebound from the face of the bleachers, and whipped it back into the diamond in time to hold Murray at third. At second Dalton fooled Dillingham into

sliding by pretending that he was going to take a throw.

The Blue Stocking fans were silent and appalled, but the stands seemed to rock with the tremendous uproar made by the sympathizers with the Specters. With second and third occupied, only one down, and Logie the hitter, it seemed a three-to-one shot that Lefty Locke had thrown away the game.

"If we only had Grist or Orth or *anybody* to go in now!" muttered Grant. "They're all cold. There's no time for 'em to warm up. Oh, this is fine management, and I'll have to shoulder a big part of the blame!"

CHAPTER XV

THROWN AWAY

IN the Blue Stocking pit Carson sat gritting his teeth and muttering, but he gave no orders that would tend to relieve the situation.

Nelson, standing on the plate with the ball in his hands, motioned repeatedly before Locke saw him and came forward. They met a few feet in front of the pan.

"What's the trouble, old man?" questioned Dirk. "Are you sick?"

"Sick? No," growled the southpaw. "Gimme the ball."

"Wait a minute. There's something wrong. You're not right."

"Nothing the matter with me. I'll get Logie. They won't score. Hear that infernal bunch howl! They make me sick!"

His angry eyes once more swept the tumultuous stands, where the crowd was jeering and hooting and shouting for the Blue Stockings to play ball.

"You're paying too much attention to the crowd, or something," said Nelson. "You're not pitching in form."

"Bah! I've got speed, haven't I?"

"Yes, but—"

"And curves, too?"

"But your control is bad. If they score now they'll take this game, best we can do."

"I tell you they won't score. Haven't I made good in every pinch to-day? Well, stop carping, and leave it to me. Just you give me the signs, and do your part of the work; that's all that's necessary."

"All right," said the catcher, trying to seem as confident and cheerful as possible. "But don't let Bugs reach the rubber—don't, for the love of goodness! Keep steady now, and we'll hold 'em yet."

He handed Lefty the ball, and Locke walked back to the mound, watching Murray, who was capering off third in an effort to draw a throw.

"Come on, come on!" coaxed Bugs. "Heave it. You can't get me. Heave it!"

But the pitcher refrained from throwing, and took his position on the slab. The moment he squared away to pitch Dillingham ran far up from second, ready to try to get home on any sort of a promising single.

That Locke had speed enough no one could deny, and now, to the surprise of his friends and his opponents alike, he seemed suddenly to have recovered his control. Doubtless Logie did not

figure on this recovery, for he stood up to the pan, without swinging, and permitted two smokers to cut the inside corner, both being called strikes. Annoyed, he gripped his bat and waited for the next one. It proved to be one of Locke's amazing hooks, all of which seemed due to cut the pan until they "broke." On the break that particular ball would shoot downward and outward beyond the corner. It did so now, and Logie pounded the air.

Laughing Larry's joyous yell sounded high and clear above the delighted shouts of the little gathering of Blue Stocking "bugs" in the watching throng.

"All right—it's all right," sang Dalton. "You're fooling 'em some to-day, Lefty, my bucko."

On the bench Billy Orth mopped his pale, perspiring face. "Great scissors!" he breathed. "I believe he's going to pull out now. If he does, I'll own up that I don't know when a man has gone to the bad."

The crowd implored Aldrich as they saw him advancing to take the place of the thoroughly disgusted Logie. The game hung by a thread, ready to drop into the laps of the Specters. Could Bush cut that thread?

"You're there, all right, Lefty," said Nelson, grinning through the wires of his mask. "If

they wait for you to hand 'em the game, they're fooled."

Locke made no retort. In position to pitch, he faced Grant and looked to see if the captain gave him a signal to throw to third. But, remembering the wild heave to first, even though Murray was taking a perilous lead, Spider withheld the signal.

"Get Aldrich," he said. "That's all you have to do."

Locke's first pitch to Aldrich was high, and the batter, after starting to swing, checked himself in time to get the benefit of a called ball.

Nelson returned the sphere promptly. Lefty muffed the toss, brushed his hand across his eyes, picked the ball up, and toed the plate.

There was a sudden wild yell of warning. Murray, spurred by desperation, securing a good lead off third, had started on the jump for the plate. It was an attempt to steal home.

"Here, here!" shouted Nelson, leaping forward to take the ball.

To the dismay of the Blue Stockings, Locke turned to look toward third before throwing. Apparently he was surprised and dazed by failing to perceive Murray anywhere in the vicinity of that sack. Nor did he at that time seem to see Dillingham coming up from second as fast as he could leg it.

"The plate! Put it home!" shrieked Larry Dalton.

Locke swung back slowly, almost heavily. At that moment Bugs was flinging himself for the slide to the pan, and it was too late to stop him. That steal had tied the score.

Then Lefty did what would have been a foolish thing had he made a perfect throw. Swinging back, he pegged the ball to third, although Dillingham was within ten feet of the sack when the sphere left the pitcher's fingers.

Leaping high, and reaching as far as he could, Jack Daly felt the ball barely graze the end of his gloved fingers. Away it went toward the left-field bleachers, and the coacher sent Dillingham on to the plate.

Joe Welch got the ball, and lined it to the pan in a hopeless attempt to stop that second run. The throw was a bit wide; and when Nelson, lunging with the ball, tagged Dillingham, the umpire spread out his open hands, palms downward.

The game was over! Locke had thrown it away at last.

CHAPTER XVI

HOT WORDS

IN a small, bare room of the clubhouse Al Carson waited, his face dark as a storm cloud. At times he muttered to himself. From the adjoining quarters of the defeated players there came no sounds of joshing or laughter. The loss of this game was a disagreeable pill for either management or men to swallow.

After a time a heavy step sounded outside, the door opened, and Lefty Locke appeared before the manager. He was pale now beneath his healthy tan, but still his once handsome, good-natured face wore a sullen, defiant expression, and his flinty eyes met Carson's withering look without wavering.

"Well," he said, his voice strangely harsh, "you sent for me."

For a moment Carson felt that he was going to blow up like a firecracker, but, somehow, he managed to control himself in a measure.

"Yes, I sent for you," he said. "I want to hear what you have to say for yourself."

"I'm not going to say anything."

"Oh, you're not! You're not going to say anything after handing the Specters that game on a platter? You're not going to say a word after an exhibition that would make a jackass weep?"

"I don't see any tears in your eyes."

Then Carson did go up. "You infernal, insolent, swell-headed cub!" he shouted. "You think you can talk to me that fashion just because you happen to have a pull with—" Barely in time he bit the sentence short. His breast heaving, his nostrils distended, he announced: "I'll show you! I'll teach you that you can't deliberately throw a game!"

"Any man who says I ever deliberately threw a game is a liar!"

Rarely in his baseball career had a player talked to Carson like that. The manager could scarcely believe the evidence of his ears, and for a moment he choked, his face purple, in an effort to articulate.

"I oughter beat your head off!" he finally ground forth.

"Try it!" invited Locke.

The manager knew better than to try it. That tall, compact, finely built man looked like a thorough athlete, and just now the expression on his face seemed to betoken that he would gladly welcome a hand-to-hand scrap with anyone.

"I won't maul you," panted Carson.

"I'm sorry," regretted the southpaw.

"But I'll teach you something, just the same. You're fined twenty-five and suspended."

For a moment or two Lefty was silent. "Perhaps you think you can make that penalty stick," he said presently. "Perhaps you think, simply because I lost a game—I'm not denying I lost it—you can call me into a private room and browbeat me, and fine me when I fail to cower and eat humble pie."

"I'm fining you for your rotten work on the field. I'd fined you then and there if I'd got hold of you before you loped off."

"You're fining me from pure malicious revenge, nothing else. As a manager you play your favorites, and I don't happen to be one of them."

"Shut up!" roared Carson. "Shut up, or I'll double it!"

"Double and be—hanged! I don't have to play baseball for a living. You can suspend me as long as you please. I'm getting tired of the game, anyway, and thinking about quitting."

"Oh, you're a quitter, all right. I reckon old Brennan, of the Hornets, had you sized up about right in the first place." Carson's total lack of diplomacy was amazing. Had he tried, with deliberate forethought, to create an unbridgable breach between himself and the left-hander, he could not have chosen a surer course. "The yel-

low streak always crops up sooner or later in any man who has it," he went on. "You can pitch, with everything breaking for you, but you lack heart. A little streak of success swelled you up till you began to think yourself a king-pin. You had an idea that you were a better man than Pete Grist, and now—"

"Have you finished?" interrupted Lefty, his voice quivering strangely. "I think I'd better go. In about ten seconds more I'll do something that will put me liable to a fine for assault and battery."

His attitude was that of a man about to attack another when the door opened and Charles Collier entered, followed by a clean-looking, tall young man. Both stopped and stared in astonishment at the tableau.

"What—what's the matter here?" spluttered the owner of the Blue Stockings. "What's the trouble, Carson?"

"Oh, nothing," answered the manager. "Nothing, only this fellow threatens me with assault when I give him a call-down for his wooden-headed work in that last inning."

"Really, Locke, I'm astonished," said Collier, beginning to show a touch of anger himself. "You must know Mr. Carson has a right to feel sore."

"But he hasn't a right to blackguard me. He

can do that with other men, perhaps, but he can't put it over on me."

"I'm simply telling him the cold facts," the manager hastened to assert. "He thinks himself so high and mighty that no one has a right to say a thing to him. He's been coddled and spoiled. There's no surer way to spoil a cub than to feed him taffy. It's his first season out of the bush, and he's beginning to reckon himself a second Walter Johnson."

"You're both excited," said Collier, in an attempt to be soothing. "Of course, there's a good reason, the game to-day meaning so much, but it's better to talk these things over in cold blood. Let's calm down a little, all of us."

His effort to cast oil on the troubled waters was partly successful, as far as Carson was concerned; for the manager did not wish the magnate to think him a person to lose his temper unreasonably in dealing with any player.

"I called him in to talk it over decently," he said; "but he became nasty right off the reel."

"Any man can talk to me decently," muttered Lefty, though the resentful light still lingered in his eyes.

"That's right, my boy; that's the way to feel," said Collier, rubbing his hands. "It's too bad we lost the game, but we'll simply have to fight the harder for the rest of the series. If we break

even, we'll still have it on the Specters. Perhaps Hazelton has been working too hard. I understand Kennedy used him a great deal. Perhaps he needs a rest."

"Maybe he does," growled Carson. "Anyhow, I'm going to give him one."

"It's likely a few days will put him back into form. My daughter is a good judge of baseball players, and she has confidence in Lefty."

The young man who had entered with the owner moved his shoulders uneasily, and bit his lip. Suddenly Collier seemed to remember him.

"Mr. Carson," he said, "let me introduce a man who wanted to meet you. A friend of myself and daughter—Mr. Parlmee. Shake hands with Carson, Franklin."

"I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. Carson," said Parlmee, as he gave the manager his hand.

"And Mr. Hazelton, too," said the magnate, with a wave toward the southpaw. "Son of an old friend of mine. Unfortunately, his father has a prejudice against baseball, so he's playing under the name of Locke."

For the first time since the appearance of the club owner and his companion, Lefty's eyes rested on the face of the latter. In a moment he was vaguely aware that he had seen the man before, but not until Parlmee had bowed coldly, without an attempt to shake hands, did Locke recall the

occasion. Then he remembered how in the last home game with the Specters, while he was talking with Virginia Collier, he had seen a young man watching him gloweringly from the stand. This was the same man, and between the two there existed a singular feeling of antipathy, as yet unaccounted for in the pitcher's mind.

Suddenly it seemed to Lefty that everything was against him, the whole world—fate, even.

"If there's nothing more," he said, his voice cold and harsh, "I think I'll be going."

"Sullen dog," said Parlmee, when the door had closed behind the departing man.

CHAPTER XVII

THE UNAPPROACHABLE LOCKE

"MEN go stale on college teams," said Charles Collier apologetically. "Perhaps that's the trouble with Locke."

"He ain't stale," asserted Carson. "That ain't the trouble with him. Look how he pitched when he wanted to."

"He seemed very erratic to me," put in Parlmee. "I've seen plenty of pitchers like him. They're never to be depended on."

"But you haven't seen him at his best," said the club owner. "This is the first full game you've ever seen him pitch. He certainly was reliable enough earlier in the season."

"The only trouble with him is in that swelled bean of his," declared Carson. "Under Kennedy he was petted and coddled and made to believe he was the real thing, spelled with capitals. As soon as he gets the same deal from me that every other man is getting, and is handled on his merits, he turns ugly."

"I suppose," observed Collier, "he has an idea that you rate Grist at the top of the list."

"Well, why shouldn't I? Look at Grist's record

and experience. There's more baseball in his little finger than this cub has learned yet. If we'd had old Peter on the mound to-day—"

"Why didn't you put him in when you saw the youngster wabbling?"

"Put him in, and then have it said I gave Locke the hook without reason? Who could foresee the fellow was going to throw the game at the last minute? I know he threatened to blow up several times, but he always tightened. Two were gone when he let Murray steal home. Even then there'd been a chance, for I might have run in another man; but he followed his dumbness up with a fool heave to the left-field bleachers. There wasn't a bit of sense in it, and, unless he was trying to pass over the game, I can't understand why he did it."

"It was the silliest thing I ever saw a pitcher do," asserted Franklin Parlmee.

"I admit that it was crazy," agreed Collier. "But he can pitch, and we need the best that's in our twirling staff in order to keep first place this year. The loss of a single pitcher would be pretty sure to fix us now. You've got to use sober judgment, Carson, if you land the championship, and doing that means something to you, as well as myself. The old burg will support a winning team and make it a money-maker, but it hasn't much stomach for losers."

"You can bank on it, Mr. Collier," said Carson, "that I'm going to do my level best to land on top. I'm not in the game, any more than you are, for the fun there is in it. If you hadn't reckoned I knew my business, I wouldn't be where I am now."

"Surely not," agreed the owner. "Kennedy did a good turn last season, and I'd not thought of displacing him if he'd shown an ability to keep the bunch united. Jealousy and cliques on a ball team always put it to the bad. It's up to you to smooth things out, and I'm afraid you're not succeeding. But for internal troubles, the Blue Stockings' lead now would make it practically impossible for the Specters or any other team to head 'em."

Al Carson was not at all pleased by the criticism of his employer, but he had sufficient good sense to repress open resentment. He made the plea that he should be given time to "smooth out the wrinkles."

"If I'm going to be given full swing," he said, "I think I should have it. I let Locke go the limit to-day because of criticism in my handling of him. Give me the proper rope, Mr. Collier, and I'll deliver the goods; but no manager can do that unless he's unhampered."

"It has never been my intention to interfere in a way to hamper you," returned Collier a bit

tartly. "Naturally, I presume I have the right to talk things over with you."

Half apologetically Carson hastened to state that it was not his intention to question that point.

"Leave me to handle this grouchy man," he promised, "and I'll bring him into harness. I know we need him to do a certain amount of pitching, but he's got to understand that there's such a thing as discipline. He ought to know he can't be sassy to his manager."

While this talk was in progress Lefty's teammates, starting for their hotel in a motor bus, wondered what had become of him. It was Rufe Hyland who announced that he had seen Locke taking a trolley car all by himself.

"S'pose he feels rotten," said Rufe, "and so he sneaked."

"There was something doing 'tween him and the old man," said Kid Lewis. "Carson called him for a private confab, and I heard sounds of fireworks."

"It's a shame," said Laughing Larry, looking strangely doleful, "a beastly shame he had that spasm in the ninth."

"Spasm?" growled Herman Brock. "Looked to me more like a trance. What ailed him, anyhow?"

"What's been ailing him for some days?"

questioned Jack Daly. "He don't eat, and I happen to know he ain't sleeping well."

Dalton knew this also, although he had said nothing about it. Suddenly, to the surprise of the others, Grist, who had taken no part in the conversation, spoke up.

"The boy must be off his feed," said Pete. "Any youngster is apt to have a slump. Give him time and he'll come round."

Now this was particularly generous of Grist, who at other times, with Lefty going at his best, had shown a disposition to belittle the southpaw's fine work. Promptly Dalton's heart warmed toward the old veteran.

"You're right, Pete," he said, "and mebbe you're the very one to put him back on his pins."

"Me?" grunted Grist.

"Yes, you."

"How y' mean?"

"By talking to him. By encouraging him."

"Huh!" grunted the old twirler. "He wouldn't listen to me."

"I believe he would, Pete. Lefty's a ripping fine fellow when he's right—the finest ever. He's generous and whole-souled, without a touch of jealousy in his make-up. All of a sudden he's gone wrong, and nobody can account for it. His particular friends can't talk to him. They've tried."

"Then I dunno why I should waste my breath," said Grist slowly. "Likely he'd jump on me and sink his spikes to the sole leather."

"I don't believe it," protested Larry earnestly. "He acts like he'd somehow got a fool notion that everybody's sore on him. Now, if he saw that you didn't feel that way—"

"All right," snapped Grist shortly. "Leave it to me; I'll talk to him like a father to a wayward son."

"But be careful," cautioned Dalton. "Handle him right."

"Leave it to me, I tell yer," advised Grist once more.

That night Lefty ate alone at the hotel, shunning his teammates. He picked at his food like a man insulting his appetite, if he had one. When he left the dining room and walked out through the lobby without looking to the right or left, Grist followed him.

Ten minutes later Grant, Hyland, and Dalton, chatting in a front window, were startled to see old Peter appear before them, his face the picture of anger and disgust.

"Say," snorted the veteran twirler, "when anybody gets me to try anything like that again he'll know it. Why, that dub would slap his grandmother's face if she peeped to him. I overtook him by chance on the street and tried to talk

decent. What did I get? He seemed to think I was trying to rub something into him, and I couldn't argue it out of his dumb noddle. The more I said the dirtier he got. I just had to give it up and quit sudden before I forgot myself and handed him a bunch of fives. Anybody that wants to talk to him hereafter can do so. *Excuse me!*"

"He wouldn't listen?" asked Dalton in deep disappointment. "Did you make him understand that your motives were friendly?"

"Dunno. I tried hard enough. 'Twan't no good. If anybody else'd met me that way, I'd soaked him. Now I'm done with Lefty Locke."

CHAPTER XVIII

UNDER A CLOUD

SOMETIMES it takes very little to upset the poise of a Big League team. Even when a winning organization is running smoothly, an injury to a single player may throw the whole machinery out of mesh. To an outsider—a mere spectator who has not studied the peculiarities of baseball at close range—this often seems unaccountable. To him, in a club with first-class substitutes waiting to fill the position of any man, there seems to be no reason why the loss of a regular player should make such a remarkable difference in the work of the entire outfit.

Few outsiders realize how evenly matched the clubs often are in the first division. Many times the action of an astute manager in replacing a player who seems to be doing splendid work in his position with another player, apparently no better, has turned a losing club into a winner, the secret of this being that the man substituted fitted in more nicely with the fine adjustment of the great machine, like a perfectly made pinion in the works of a watch.

It is not drawing it too fine to compare a first-class Big League team to a high-grade watch. Time after time the spectators wonder at the clockwork precision of the living machine upon the field. Now and then, at rare intervals, of course, this piece of machinery temporarily goes wrong; but a little oiling or adjusting puts it right again, and it once more resumes its accurate, methodical, mechanical course.

The pitching staff may be likened to the mainspring of the watch. Without pitchers of the highest grade any club, no matter how strong it may be in other departments, is badly handicapped; with such a staff it often happens that a team of otherwise inferior caliber makes no end of trouble and worriment for the leaders. And, despite his ill-advised handling of Lefty Locke, no one knew this better than Al Carson.

When it became known that Lefty had been fined and suspended, some of his teammates attempted to condole with him in a cheerful, joshing way, but not one of them repeated such advances; for he cut them short with such snappy, savage abruptness that they were justified in their resentment of his manner.

The second game of the series between the Specters and the Blue Stockings proved to be a slugging match, in which each team used three

pitchers. Pink Dillon, starting for the visitors, was pounded off the mound in the second inning and replaced by Orth. He lasted until the seventh, and then gave way to Grist, who took up the burden with the locals leading by one run. Even "Old Reliable" was not respected by the Specters, who slashed his slants mercilessly. Nevertheless, by a great batting rally in the ninth, the Blue Stockings tied up the score. But Grist was forced to work like a horse for three more long innings before his teammates got to Jim Donovan and hammered out the run which finally gave them the game fourteen to thirteen.

The newspaper reporters called it a "swat fest." In his wire to the *Blade,* Jack Stillman, on the road for his paper with the Blue Stockings, vaguely hinted at future trouble for Carson on account of the condition of his pitching staff. Besides Carson himself, no one realized better than Stillman the peril of this crucial period in the great struggle.

Under suspension, Lefty Locke was not on the bench with his teammates. Stillman, who had twice tried to get an interview with Lefty, saw him soberly watching the struggle from a portion of the stand near the reporters' section, and wondered what really had happened to change this fine, open-hearted fellow into a gloomy grouch.

"I'll get at him again," thought the reporter.

"He's got to talk to me. He can't stand me off like an iceberg."

But after the game Locke disappeared with the crowd that disappointedly melted away, and Stillman was compelled to postpone his interview.

With his ears open for everything connected with his business, the newspaper man that night heard something which sent him in search of Carson for confirmation. However, he obtained little satisfaction from the manager. Then, remembering his desire to have another talk with Locke, he tried to find Lefty, and failed. The southpaw was not in his room, and none of the players seemed to know where he could be located.

In Dirk Nelson's room Stillman found Kid Lewis and Jack Daly lounging and talking things over with the catcher. Being well liked by the entire team, he was invited to join them.

"We was just figgerin' on our chances to-morrer," said Daly. "We've got to have another one of the games here to keep us afloat on the roller."

"If the Specters play the way they did to-day," said Stillman, "you ought to cop one more, anyhow."

"Huh!" grunted the Kid, twisting off a chew of tobacco with his square teeth, "seems to me we didn't shine like stars of the first magnitude this P. M. Why, with old Peter on the firing line

we was barely able to rake in the plum by one measly run."

"And the way Grist had to go, he won't be in any shape to-morrow," said Nelson. "Neither Orth nor Dillon can hold this bunch of sack swipers, and, besides pitching yesterday, Locke's suspended. We've got a couple of reserves, but Handy's arm is broke in the middle, and Carney has been sick for a month. Excuse my tears."

"I wish you'd tell me," said Stillman, "what's the matter with Locke, anyhow."

"Tell *us*," invited the trio in chorus.

The reporter shook his head. "I've tried to find out, but he won't talk to me. Anybody would think," he added in an injured way, "that I was his worst enemy; and I was about the only news man who pulled hard for him all the way after he joined the Hornets in the South last spring."

"He's sick," cried Nelson, thumping his knee. "If he ain't, he's crazy, and oughter be shut up somewhere with the rest of the bugs. Think of him going wrong just now! Wouldn't it make a parson use bad language!"

"I heard something to-night," said Stillman. "I wonder if you fellows have got wind of it? There's a rumor that Carson has a deal on."

"What sort of a deal?" asked Daly.

"A trade. They say he got busy on the wire this morning, and that he's trying to make ar-

rangements to trade Locke off for another pitcher."

"Who says so?" snapped Lewis.

"I don't believe it!" shouted Daly.

"Thunder!" breathed Nelson.

"You know I can't go round blowing the source of my information," said Stillman, "but it seemed to come straight enough."

"Perhaps it is straight," said Nelson. "Carson ain't never took to Locke. But who's the man he's after?"

"You couldn't guess," said the reporter. "I won't prolong your agony. If the report is true, it's Chick O'Brien, of the Wolves."

Even with the warning he had given them, this statement seemed to strike them like a bursting bombshell. The Wolves, although in the second division, had harried the leaders all through the season, mainly by the marvelous work of O'Brien, and it was generally agreed that with a first-division team behind him Chick would show himself one of the great pitchers in the business.

"Sufferin' snakes!" cried Lewis, his face glowing and his eyes snapping. "If we could get Chick now, I'd begin right away planning how to spend my post-season money."

"Me, too," agreed Daly.

"There's nothing to it," announced Nelson. "You couldn't pry O'Brien away from the Wolves

with a twenty-thousand dollar lever. Old Frazer wouldn't let him go for *two* youngsters like Locke and a barrel of money to boot. Every manager in the league has been after him, and Frazer's held on with the grip of death, knowing the Wolves would go plumb into the sub-cellar without Chick."

"Collier's got the dough to buy almost anything, and he's a plunger when he gets started," said Stillman. "I reckon he'd be willing to lose money this season to cop the championship again. Anyhow, Carson wouldn't deny that he was trying to put such a deal across. He wouldn't say anything about it."

"Whether it's true or not, the story is bad for Locke," said Nelson; "and if it gets to his ears it's going to make him worse than he is."

"Or brace him up," put in Daly. "Mebbe it will do that."

Of course, the rumor spread swiftly, and in short order every man on the team had heard of it, save Locke himself. For reasons, no one told Lefty.

The fears of the Blue Stockings seemed justified when the Specters walked away with the third game of the series by a score of eight to two. Such a defeat, instead of disheartening them, seemed to fire them with desperation, and the fourth and final game proved to be another ter-

rific battle, in which the two teams seesawed from start to finish, resorting to every legitimate device and trick as opportunities arose. Nevertheless, only for a fluke in the eighth inning, the locals doubtless would have taken the game.

With two down and two on the cushions, Herman Brock banged the ball into deep left, and it went bounding to the fence, with Forbes in hot pursuit. The fielder had been playing deep, knowing Brock's menace as a slugger, and, but for an unforeseen freak of fate, he doubtless would have secured the ball and held the enemy to a single run. It happened, however, that close to the ground there was a small hole in the fence—a hole barely large enough to push an ordinary baseball through; and never before had the sphere sought out that little opening hidden by a thin fringe of grass. Now, with seeming perverseness, it went straight through the hole, giving Brock a homer and putting the visitors again in the lead.

Orth had been wabbling, and Carson had wisely kept Dillon warming up all through the game. Now, when the Specters came to bat again, the manager took a chance and sent Pink to the hillock.

Strange as it seemed, the slants and benders of this second-string pitcher, which had been so easy for the locals to fathom two days before, now proved tremendously puzzling. And, though the

fighting "ghosts" became menacing in both the eighth and ninth, they could not quite succeed in pushing a runner round the course.

Therefore, for all of the tattered condition of their pitching staff, the Blue Stockings broke even in the series with their most dangerous rivals.

But they were now to invade the territory of the Terriers, always to be feared, and the dark cloud swung lower.

CHAPTER XIX

THE STRANGER

THE train was swinging along through open, rolling country when Locke, now being left severely to himself on account of his churlishness by his resentful teammates, tired of gazing dully at the flying landscape, rose and passed down the aisle of the special car. Scarcely anyone seemed to observe him, and he noticed no one. When he had disappeared, however, Billy Orth shook his head and turned to Larry Dalton.

"Thundering shame, Larry," he said in a low tone. "Do you know, I think I've solved the trouble."

"Then you're wiser than the rest of us."

"It's the girl business, to begin with."

"Oh, we've all guessed that much, but being thrown down by a girl isn't enough to put an ordinary well-balanced chap, same as Lefty seemed to be, all to the punk. Of course, it might affect a fellow, but it wouldn't turn him from a fine, jolly soul into a sour, nasty-tempered,

unreasoning grump. You've got to go farther, Billy."

"I have been," asserted the other with assurance.

"What way?"

"He's taken to hitting the booze."

"No!" breathed Laughing Larry incredulously. "Why, he never drank. He'd take a glass of beer now and then, to be sure, but you couldn't drive a drink of hard stuff into him. You're wrong, Orth."

"When a man gets double crossed in love he's liable to do any freakish thing, and lots of 'em affiliate with the jag juice."

"But Locke hasn't been full. No one has seen him under the influence."

"Perhaps he's under the influence right now. Perhaps he's keeping about so much redeye in his skin all the time. Maybe that's why he herds by himself so much. He sure has had plenty of chance to drink by his lonesome lately."

"Yes, but— Oh, say, you've got to have something better than mere supposition to base this on."

"I have."

"What?"

"Saw him coming out of a saloon last night. Couldn't believe my eyes at first, but it was Lefty, sure. You know firewater works in peculiar

ways with some men. Occasionally it turns a jolly good fellow into an ugly dog. Lefty hasn't hit it up enough to stagger or show the usual signs, but in his effort to drown his sorrow he's taken just enough to change him completely. Something ought to be done. But when a fellow is absolutely unapproachable, what can you do?"

"What can you?" echoed Larry.

In the meantime, passing through the train, Lefty had entered the ordinary smoker, which chanced to be so well filled that nearly every seat was taken. Through a blue haze of smoke he peered in search of a seat as he walked along the aisle. Suddenly a young man took a brierwood pipe from his mouth, stared hard at the pitcher, and rose to his feet.

"By Jove! Phil Hazelton!" he exclaimed. "Why, how are you, old man?"

Lefty stared, unsmiling, at the speaker, apparently failing to notice the extended hand.

"Pardon me," he said; "I don't remember you."

"Don't remember me?" cried the other incredulously. "Great Scott! Have I changed so much? I know I'm threatened with premature baldness, but still it can't be that in such a short time you've forgotten Walt Hetner."

"Hetner?" said Locke, frowning and shaking

his head in a puzzled way. "I don't have the slightest recollection of you."

"Cæsar's ghost! I knew you at Princeton. We were college mates."

"Princeton?" said Lefty. "Yes, I was at Princeton, I believe."

"You pitched for the varsity nine. Your old man didn't like it, and was pretty sore. I've heard lately that you've gone into professional baseball. Don't get a chance to see many games myself nowadays, but the report is that you're *some pitcher* for the Blue Stockings."

"I have been pitching for them," admitted Locke slowly. "Sorry I don't remember you."

His pride hurt, Hetner sank back into his seat, and Lefty passed on. The rebuffed man turned to his companion, who was an old acquaintance he had met on the train.

"Well, wouldn't that frost you some, Wilson?" he exclaimed, his face flushed. "Why, I knew that fellow at college as well as I know you, and he's the last man I'd expect to hand out anything of that sort."

"Do you think he didn't recognize you, Doctor?"

"Recognize me? Of course he did. That's what makes me hot. I don't know why he should play the cad. It's beyond me. Perhaps he's

ashamed of the fact that he's playing professional baseball under a fake name."

"Still," said Wilson, "he might be decent, at least."

Lefty came to a seat in which a slender, pallid, sad-eyed young man sat alone.

"I beg your pardon, stranger," he said; "is this seat taken?"

The young man started a bit, glanced up, and smiled faintly.

"No, it isn't taken, pal," he answered. "But how the dickens did you happen to know my name?"

"Your name?" said Lefty, sinking down, a puzzled frown plowing a deep furrow between his eyes.

"Yes. You called me Stranger. That's my monacker—Robert Stranger; Bob for short."

"Oh, I get you," said Lefty, failing to return the young man's engaging smile. "It was just by chance that I called you that."

"Well, for a moment I thought you knew me. It's mighty lonesome taking this jaunt without anybody to chin to, and I'm glad you came along. Traveling alone yourself?"

"In a way I am," answered Lefty, betraying a willingness to talk to this chance acquaintance which would have surprised his antagonized friends in the special car. "I'm a ball player,

but I ducked to get away from the rest of the bunch. They're on this train."

"Oh, a ball player!" murmured Mr. Stranger. "Professional? Big League?"

"The Blue Stockings."

"They're some," beamed the man by the car window. "Of course I hear plenty of baseball talk. Can't help it. But I never did take to the game much. It may sound like bunk to you, but I never saw a real game in my life."

"Really?" said Lefty, in an expressionless way. "That is rather odd."

"S'pose I'm a crank," laughed the other; "but all the guff I hear and see in the newspapers about baseball makes me weary; it sure does. Seems like ninety per cent. of the population has gone dippy about the game. Once on a time I was mistook for a pitcher I happened to look like. A gent blew up and called me by that ball tosser's name and asked me how I was coming on at it. He didn't believe me when I told him I'd never pitched a ball in my life. Why, I don't know a curve from a wedge of restaurant pie."

"You're a rare bird," said Lefty.

"I am, pal, and I'm rather proud of it."

"What's your business, if it's not too personal?"

The young man hesitated and coughed behind his hand.

"I'm a—a diamond cutter," he answered. "That is, I have been, but I've had to give it up on account of my health. Too confining, you know. I'm not much on being confined," he continued oddly. "You can see it has rather taken hold of me. My health isn't just what it should be."

"I noticed you were unusually pale."

"That comes from confinement. A pill slinger told me it would be a good thing for me to get out into the country and find a job somewhere in the open air. I'm looking for work on a farm. The rural life for mine, far from the lure of high-cut swinging doors. Between us, pal, I've hit it up a bit too hard in my day. I always was a wild one," he went on garrulously. "Even when I was a boy I touched too many of the high spots. I've been a mark, too. Ever play poker? Well, I've been the easiest dub you ever saw at that game. But I like it. Can't seem to keep away from it. Every time I get a roll on hand I go searching for a game and someone to pass the velvet over to. Even now I've got a little wad of long green that's burning in my pocket. Before you came along I was thinking I'd like to find three or four good sports and get up a little game."

"I don't play poker—for blood," said Lefty. "A bunch on the team are at it every chance they

get; though, of course, they only play a little game."

"Oh, that would suit me. I don't want to really gamble, you know. I'm a minister's son."

Lefty refrained from saying that he was another.

"Brought up in a straight-laced family," Stranger went on. "My old man thought cards the tools of Satan. And my mother"—a cloud seemed to come to his face and his smile faded—"it broke her heart when she found out I was playing penny ante with a bunch of game lads. Mebbe that's what finished her. The old gent didn't last long after she was put away under the daisies."

"Then your father and mother are both dead?"

"Both gone. But come, what's the use to talk of things like that? Let's see if we can't find a couple of lonesome travelers looking for amusement. Let's start something. A little game of poker to pass away—"

The sentence never was finished. At this moment there came a sudden jarring, grinding, crashing sound. A broken rail had given way on a curve, and it shot half the train from the track to strew it into a splintered mass of wreckage along the foot of the embankment.

CHAPTER XX

THE RETIRED MANAGER

THROUGHOUT his baseball career it had been the object of old Jack Kennedy to quit the game voluntarily with honors and retire to his little Ohio farm in the town of Deering. Being of a somewhat frugal turn, he had saved from his earnings while in the game enough to pay for the farm to the last dollar, which was a matter of no small satisfaction to him when Charles Collier, the new owner of the Blue Stockings, dropped him from the management of the team in order to give Al Carson that position.

Without egotism, Kennedy knew himself to be more capable than Carson; but still he made no protest, and, in spite of his evident regret over bidding the players good-by, he succeeded very well in hiding the sore spot.

"I'm done with baseball, boys," he said. "Henceforth it's the rural life for me, raising corn and pumpkins and garden sass in general. If any of you ever come through my way, don't forget where I live. You'll make a hit with me

if you take my wigwam for the home plate and squat on the bench at my fireside."

Kennedy knew full well the real trouble with the Blue Stockings, and it had been his object to break up the cliques and smooth out the wrinkles on the team in his own level-headed way. He knew also that Carson was due to have his troubles, and, like the generous man he was, he had approached the new manager and attempted to put him wise. These advances, however, were not pleasing to Carson, who had cut him short in a way that caused Kennedy to bottle up abruptly.

"All right," old Jack had muttered to himself. "All right, my wise gink. Go your way and see where you land. I'm betting it won't be on top."

Despite the fact that he had said he was done with baseball, it was no more than natural that he should keep track of the career of the Blue Stockings under the new management, and the sporting department of the big daily newspaper he received regularly by mail was the first page examined. Each day he drove a mile and a half into town to get the two o'clock mail, and the letters he received never seemed to have much attraction for him until he had ripped off the cover of his paper, glanced at the percentage of the Big League teams, and perused the report of the last contest in which the Blue Stockings had participated. While he was doing this his face was

a study. Sometimes he would smile, but more often he frowned and shook his head, and occasionally he muttered to himself. Once a man, standing near, was startled to hear him suddenly exclaim:

"What's the matter with the boy, anyhow? Either he's slumped or Carson's handing him a rotten deal."

Of course he was speaking of Lefty Locke, and when, later, he saw a printed reference to the southpaw's poor form, he puzzled still more over the matter. For Kennedy had realized the need of new blood on the pitching staff of the Blue Stockings, and had banked a good deal on the ability of Locke to aid in holding the team in first place.

With an excellent overseer on his farm, old Jack did not labor hard enough to hurt himself. The truth was, he found it difficult to step directly from the baseball harness into something so wholly different and so decidedly tame and monotonous by comparison. At times he fretted a little, although he did his best to overcome the restless spells that assailed him.

"When an old race horse is turned out to pasture," he told himself, "it's a good thing for him to realize that his track days are over."

Now it chanced that the town of Deering supported one of the teams which composed a four-

cornered bush league, and, although the loyal citizens had put their hands deep into their pockets to finance the club, the "Deers," as the local organization was known, were running a rather bad third in the race. This fact was the cause of no small dissatisfaction to Peter McLaughlin, proprietor of the Central House, the principal hotel, and one of the most generous contributors to the fund. In the old days McLaughlin had played baseball a little himself, and he was confident now that he knew just where the trouble with the local club lay.

"It's in the management," he told the other members of the board of directors. "Sperry made a record as manager for a little jerkwater college club, therefore he thinks he knows all about it. But I tell you he's no match for old Hank Bristol, of the Buccaneers, to say nothing of Hi Pelty, who's handling the Stars. Last year, this time, the Buccaneers were in third place, where we are now, and we was banging away trying to get ahead of the Stars. This year we're down next to the Boobs in the basement, and unless something's done even that bunch of dummies will get ahead of us. Sperry better throw up his job as manager and stick to his regular business drawing sody water at Folsom's drug store."

"If he did that," said Lawyer Gange, secretary of the baseball association, "who'd we get to fill

his place? Nobody else wants the job—unless you do, Peter."

"Excuse me," said McLaughlin. "I've got my own business to look after. I've coughed up a hundred bucks to back the team, and I'm ready to put in another hundred if necessary, but I couldn't waste my time trying to run the outfit, even if I knew how."

"Well, that's the way with the rest of us, so what are we going to do?"

"I've got an idea. There's Jack Kennedy home on his farm, and he knows more baseball in a minute than anybody in this town, or in the whole league, for that matter, except possibly old Hank Bristol. If we could get Kennedy to—"

"*If* we could," exclaimed Rufe Manning, the treasurer. "There's that if. You don't s'pose Kennedy would monkey with a little bush team like ours after being manager of Big League champs, do yer?"

"No tellin'. Perhaps he might."

"He won't," said the lawyer. "He told me himself that he was done with baseball. Why, he hasn't even had interest enough since coming home to see one of our games, though he's been invited to do so."

"No tellin' what can be done with him," persisted the hotel proprietor. "He ought to have enough local pride to want to see his own town

stand well in this league. If somebody could prick that pride a little, mebbe he'd take holt. I don't reckon he's workin' himself to death on his farm. He's got the time."

"Well, you're the man to try him," said Gange. "It's up to you, Peter."

"All right," agreed Peter. "Leave it to me and I'll see what I can do. We're going up against Bristol's bunch of Buccaneers this afternoon, and I'll look out for Kennedy if he comes in for his mail same as usual."

CHAPTER XXI

BACK IN THE GAME

WHEN he cornered old Jack at the post office, half an hour before the game was to start, McLaughlin's proposition failed to arouse the retired manager's interest.

"I'm done with the game, Peter," said Kennedy. "I'm just a plain farmer now. As long as I don't mean to get mixed up with it again, it's best that I should keep away from the field."

"Do you know, Jack," said the hotel man, "folks around here say you've got a grouch. They say you're sore on baseball 'cause you was turned down. We've been rather proud of you in this town. When you come home twice after winning the championship we gave you a blow-out both times. You seem to have forgot that."

"No, I haven't forgot it, Peter. But when a man has quit a certain line of business, and quit it for good, he'd better cease to monkey with it. With me baseball was a business for a good many years. I own up that I was rather proud of my record at it."

"And you was so proud of being manager of Big League champs that now you won't even ask how the little fellers are doing in your own home town. You used to set round my office winters and talk it over with the boys and give them points, but this time you're changed so folks scarcely know you. Why, there's Hank Bristol, manager of the Buccaneers, who's asked for you every time he hit Deering, saying as how he used to know you well and he'd like to put his blinkers on you again. He was some baseball player once himself, and he's pretty clever at it yet, as fur as our sort of baseball goes. I should think you'd like to see him operate around second base. He's up to the field right now with his bunch, and he says he's goin' to drive another nail in our coffin. His team ain't only a few points behind the Stars, and Hank reckons the pennant's as good as nailed."

"Bristol always did talk a lot with his mouth," said Kennedy. "If he can't win any other way, he'll bluff out a victory."

It was the sore spot not yet healed which had caused Kennedy to avoid Bristol; for Jack, knowing old Hank would ask questions, was far from eager to furnish explanations regarding his sudden release by Collier.

"Oh, well, do as you're a mind to," said McLaughlin, with pretended indifference. "I've

done some personal favors for you. When we give you that banquet at the hotel last year—"

Flushing, Kennedy interrupted. "If you're going to put it up to me that way, Peter," he said, "I'll go out and watch the game to-day. Perhaps I can give your manager some tips that will help him."

In this manner it came about that Kennedy saw the struggle that afternoon between the Deers and the Buccaneers and warned the manager of the former team, in the midst of the game, that Bristol's players had the signals of the locals and were, therefore, forewarned and prepared for every method of attack. This warning, however, was not sufficient to prevent the Buccaneers from winning. In the eighth inning they secured a lead of two runs through their disposition to take chances on the paths, and the failure of the Deering pitcher to hold the runners close to the cushions, and at the end of the ninth they were still one tally to the good, although outbatted and out fielded.

With a supercilious, confident grin adorning his homely face, Bristol encountered Kennedy after the clash was over.

"You see how easy it is out here in the bush, Ken, old hoss," he chuckled. "It's a reg'lar cinch to make a winning team if you've got any mater'al

to work with. Before next week's over we'll be leadin'. I took it easy to-day. Saved my best pill slinger for the Stars to-morrow. Your poor little Deers are due to find a resting place in a deep, dark hole."

"Don't call them *my* Deers, Hank," remonstrated Kennedy. "I ain't got nothing to do with them. If I had—"

"It would be just the same, Jack, old boy. You had a streak with the Blue Stockings, I own up; but it was broke before they put Carson in your place. I reckon you lost your rabbit's foot. If I'd ever had your chance—"

"You've had chances enough in your day," cut in Kennedy a trifle warmly. "I was about ready to quit baseball, anyhow; that's why I bought my farm here."

"Oh, you was always a clever gink holding on to the dollars and salting 'em away," returned Bristol.

In truth, he was jealous of Kennedy's success, although he endeavored to disguise the fact beneath a joshing exterior. Such joshing, however, was not calculated to please.

"Let me tell you something, Hank," said Kennedy. "If the manager of this Deering bunch knew his business he could eat you up. It wasn't much of a trick to swipe such a simple code of

signals, and any sort of runners could steal on a pitcher with a movement like Corey's. Don't get so chesty."

"Old hoss," retorted the Buccaneer manager, "if you had the Deers it would be just the same, believe me."

"Perhaps so," said Kennedy.

Twenty minutes later he was talking with Peter McLaughlin in a private room at the hotel.

"What was that proposition you made to me, Peter?" he asked. "Did you say the town generally thought Sperry inefficient as a manager and wanted someone else?"

"That's what I said," answered the landlord. "We've talked it over, and you're the man we'd like to have. Sperry would get out willingly, too. He's got about enough of it, with everybody kickin' at him."

"If you're giving it to me straight," said Kennedy, "I'll stand. You may tell the association that."

At a meeting of the directors, called that night, Sperry resigned as manager of the Deering baseball team and Jack Kennedy was chosen to fill the position vacated.

CHAPTER XXII

BUILDING UP THE TEAM

WITH the season three-quarters over, it was no cinch for anybody to whip into winning form a bush team like the Deers, and Jack Kennedy soon realized that he had a real problem on his hands. Having shouldered the responsibility, however, he went at it with the same conscientious earnestness he would have devoted to a Big League organization, and the bushers, who had been taking things easy and "soldiering" under Sperry, quickly learned that there would be no loafing or fooling with the new manager. Whenever possible there was regular forenoon practice, and when this could not be secured it was necessary for the team to appear on the playing field for a long warming-up before any league game.

The code of signals arranged and put into use by Sperry and Toots Kilgore, second baseman and captain of the Deers, was promptly cast into the discard. In place of these incomplete and rather simple signals, old Jack introduced a new

code, at which the men were drilled on the field and off, the requirement being that every one of them should become so familiar with the signs that there could be no possible misunderstanding, doubt, or hesitation in any event.

Of course, Kennedy secured a suit for himself, which enabled him not only to sit on the bench and direct his men, but to go on to the coaching lines or take the place of another player as a pinch hitter or upon the field. The loose ends were quickly gathered up, and the former hit-or-miss style of going after a game was abandoned for something bearing a genuine resemblance to inside baseball.

Nor did it take old Jack long to perceive that the arrangement of the team, as well as the batting order, needed doctoring. His first move, of course was to line up the batters so that their individual work in offense would become as effective as possible in securing runs. Almost simultaneously he called to the bench the regular center fielder, although that individual had established a record in the league for his great ground covering, sureness on flies, and splendidly accurate long throws to the sacks or the plate. It was Kennedy's theory that all outfielders should be hitters, and the man benched had the lowest batting average on the team. The former first baseman was sent out into the middle garden, where

he soon demonstrated that he had the making of an outfielder.

The regular third baseman did not handle hot grounders to Kennedy's satisfaction, but in all other ways he could cover the sack well, therefore the manager switched him round to first, where he would not get so many sizzling grass clippers. This move proved to be a piece of wisdom, but it left the third station vacant, and for some time Kennedy was bothered to plug the hole. The first person tried was Tim Coffin, the utility man, who had been kept on the bench, but Coffin had the same trouble with sharp ground hits. Nevertheless, at bat he was certain to get one clean, hard bingle a game, and his average was nearly two, which created in Kennedy's breast a strong desire to keep him regularly at work.

"Have you ever done any backstopping, Coffin?" asked the manager.

"A little," was the reply. "I started out to be a catcher."

"You've got a good whip," said old Jack. "We'll try you behind the pan to-day. Brinkley will have a go at third."

Behind the pan Coffin did a splendid turn, being far more successful than Brinkley in stopping base pilfering. Brinkley was one of those backstops who could handle almost any sort of pitching and rarely let a wild heave get past him if

there was any possible way of touching it, but his base throwing was erratic. The players of every other team in the league knew this, but they soon found that they could not reap the advantage of a wild throw off Coffin at a critical time, and their first efforts to do so cost them dearly.

But Brinkley was no third baseman, and Kennedy kept the wires hot with distress signals in his efforts to fill that position.

In response to one of those signals, Joe Digg blew into Deering. Digg had come up from the sand lots through the minors to the Big League, where, after creating a sensation in the early part of one season, he passed away in a blaze of red fire. Drink had sent Joe back to the minors and thence down into temporary oblivion. Kennedy knew him as a crackajack third sacker and a terror to pitchers when he was sober and in condition. Old Jack met the new man at the station.

"Hello, Joe," he said cordially, shaking Digg's hand. "Glad to see you."

"Hello, Jack," returned Digg, with equal cordiality. "I'm glad to see you, but I never expected it would be managing a bunch of bushers."

"Oh, this is just a little matter of sport," explained Kennedy. "I'm out of the game, you know. I'm a farmer now. But it happened that they had a team here in this burg that was getting walloped because of bad management, and

my friends in town drafted me into service. I want you to come out with me to the farm to-night, and we'll have a little chat."

They did have a chat that night after supper on Kennedy's veranda. In his bluff, open way, which seldom caused offense or produced resentment, the manager came to the point without beating around the bush.

"Joe," he said, "you ought to be drawing a fancy salary to-day in the Big League, and it's your own fault that you ain't."

"Tell me something I don't know," returned Digg, flushing.

"Booze has downed many a good man besides yourself. Are you going to let it keep you down?"

"I dunno. Seems like I'm such a thunderin' fool that I can't help it."

"Rot! You can help it. Keep away from jag hunters and you'll be all right. As I said, I'm out of Big League baseball for good, but I reckon my judgment and my influence would count for something with a number of managers who are still in the game. If I should say to one of them that I had a player who ought to be given a trial, that man would get a show, even if he had been canned after one fizzle. You get me?"

"I get you, Jack," nodded Digg, a gleam of excitement in his eyes. "If you can work me back

into the game you'll do me a turn I'll never forget."

"But you know I wouldn't try such a thing unless I was satisfied that you had really turned over a new leaf and meant to cut drink out for good and all. You've got to show me, Joe."

"It's a go!" exclaimed Digg. "If you ever catch me drinking anything stronger than water, put the tag on me."

In the first two games in which Digg played third for the Deers he accepted eleven chances, three of them of the most sensational order, without an error, and batted .400.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MAN WHO DENIED HIMSELF

HIS pitching staff gave Kennedy the most trouble. No matter how efficient a team may be in other departments, it cannot aspire to championship honors unless it has a capable staff of twirlers. Curley, Sullivan, and Heines, the three mound men for the Deers, each and all had some weakness which was a drawback.

Curley was erratic and never to be depended on. One day he might pitch a splendid game, and follow it on his next turn with wretched work. Sullivan had a long swing which gave base runners a big lead and made it almost impossible for the best throwing catcher to keep them from stealing. Nor could old Jack break the man of this swing, for when he tried to do so Sullivan's short-arm delivery proved to be "pie" for the opposing stickers. Heines had an arm that was good for four or five innings, then broke like the most brittle glass.

In one pinch, with Heines' wing failing in the fifth and the Deers having a lead of three runs,

Kennedy actually went on to the mound himself. Curley had pitched the day before, and old Jack knew Sullivan's delivery would hand the game over to the enemy. Never in his life had Kennedy attempted to pitch in anything resembling a league game, and he was not the possessor of as much as one little dinky curve. Yet, using from start to finish an underhanded ball, delivered from the knee and shot upward close across the batter's shoulder, he managed to pull the game out of the fire by a margin of one lonesome tally.

When the Deering fans hailed him as a pitcher Kennedy laughed them to scorn.

"That was the greatest case of horseshoes ever," he declared. "I couldn't do it again against a bunch of grammar-school kids. Heines had the Stars dizzy by his speed, and when I handed them up that subway rise they simply broke their backs trying to hit it. If I'd begun the game I wouldn't have lasted an inning."

All this time, of course, he was trying to get hold of other pitchers, and, most of all, he desired a left-hander to use against the Buccaneers, who had five left-handed batters. Somehow he got hold of a southpaw by the name of Billy Winkle, who seemed to have speed, curves, and control. His lack of head might have been balanced by the good judgment of Coffin, who was steadily and swiftly improving behind the bat,

but Winkle lacked heart as well as head; and in the breaks the uproar of the rooters, combined with Billy's fear of what was going to happen, invariably cut the guy ropes.

About this time, still eagerly following the career of the Blue Stockings, Kennedy was startled one day when he opened his newspaper and read some black headlines on the first page which told of a railroad disaster in which the Big League team was involved. In the smash seven persons had been killed and twenty-one more or less seriously injured. By rare good fortune the special car containing the ball players had shot down the embankment on its wheels and remained in an upright position after plowing deep into a boggy place at the roadside. It had not been smashed, and, save for a shaking up and a few bruises, not one of the men in that car had been hurt.

Having read to this point, Kennedy drew a deep breath of relief. A moment later, however, he uttered a smothered exclamation of dismay, for the next paragraph stated that one of the players, Lefty Locke, had not been in the car and was missing since the catastrophe. He was not among those killed or injured, and all efforts to find him had proved fruitless.

"Well, I'll be—jiggered!" muttered Kennedy. "Wasn't in the car! Hasn't been found! Well,

what's become of the boy? He was under suspension. I'm afraid—"

He did not state what he was afraid of, but the serious, troubled face which he wore, and his eagerness for further details concerning the disaster, indicated that anxiety over the fate of Lefty remained in his mind.

One evening, two days later, shortly after the arrival of the seven o'clock train in Deering, Kennedy sought Landlord McLaughlin in the Central House to consult with him regarding some matter concerning the team. As old Jack entered the office he saw a man at the desk in the act of registering. There was something strangely familiar about this man's back, and when the new arrival made inquiries for a room with bath the sound of his voice caused the manager of the Deers to step forward quickly to get a look at his face.

As the clerk was fishing a big brass key from a pigeonhole the guest leaned his left elbow on the edge of the desk and swung part way round, thus bringing himself face to face with Kennedy. The latter gasped, and let out something like a shout.

"Holy smoke!" he cried delightedly. "As I live, it's Lefty Locke! How are you, son?"

To Kennedy's astonishment, no light of recognition rose into the man's eyes, and he made no

move to shake the extended hand. Instead, he surveyed the old manager in a puzzled, doubting way, and slowly shook his head.

"I think you've made a mistake, pal," he said. "My name is Stranger—Robert Stranger."

His mouth open, Kennedy slowly permitted his hand to drop at his side. For something like half a minute he stared steadily at the person who had denied his acquaintance. Suddenly he laughed.

"What's the joke, Lefty?" he asked. "Put me wise."

"Really, there's no joke," was the grave assertion. "You've got me wrong."

"What's that?" rasped old Jack. "Do you mean to say you don't recognize John Kennedy, your old manager?"

Something like an annoyed frown crept into the somber, handsome face of the younger man.

"I tell you," he said a trifle warmly, "you've got me wrong. To my knowledge I never heard of you in all my life. You call me Locke, but my name is Stranger. That's my monacker—Robert Stranger, Bob for short."

Kennedy pinched himself. "I'm awake," he muttered. "There can't be two men so much alike in the whole world. Besides, he wrote his name on the register with his left hand."

Suddenly he began to feel a touch of anger.

"See here," he said harshly, "maybe your right name ain't Locke, but you can't deny that it's Hazelton. You can't deny that you're a baseball pitcher and that you were under my management on the Blue Stockings."

"The Blue Stockings?" said the other. "They're some. I hear plenty of baseball talk. Can't help it. But I never did take to the game any. Perhaps it sounds like bunk to you, but I never saw a real game in my life."

"Help!" cried Kennedy. "I'm loony, or he is!"

CHAPTER XXIV

PERPLEXED

THE brazen, barefaced manner in which Lefty Locke denied his identity and professed that he had never even seen a game of baseball was simply staggering. For old Jack still refused to believe the man could be any one save Locke himself.

What was Lefty's object? Surely he ought to know that he could not fool his old manager by such a silly subterfuge and barefaced falsehood. That he was trying to "put over" a puerile joke did not appear possible, and certainly there was no twinkle of mirth in his steady eyes, no smile upon his sober face.

There was something behind the young pitcher's denial of his identity which Kennedy could not understand, something which confused as well as annoyed him. He was mustering his wits to begin all over again when suddenly the new arrival said:

"I trust you'll excuse me, pal. I'll have to wash up before supper, which I see is in progress now." He glanced in the direction of the open

doors to the dining room and turned to the clerk. "Can I have my room now?" he asked.

"Your luggage?" questioned the clerk significantly.

"I haven't any. I'll pay a day in advance. How much?"

"Three dollars."

Producing a roll of bills, the man peeled off a two and a one and shoved them across the desk, whereupon the clerk handed the key over to a boy, who invited the guest to follow him.

They had not disappeared before Kennedy was surveying the register, on which he found written: "Robert Stranger, N. Y."

"Well, wouldn't that freeze you stiff!" he muttered.

He was still muttering to himself when Landlord McLaughlin appeared.

"What's the matter now, Jack?" inquired the sporting proprietor of the Central House. "You're growlin' like a dog with a sore ear. Same old trouble 'bout pitchers, I s'pose?"

"I came in to consult with you about that southpaw, Mercer, we've been trying to get holt of for a week. I've got him to state his terms at last."

"Good," said McLaughlin.

"Bad," said Kennedy. "He wants sixty a week and board. We can't afford it, Peter, in

this little crossroads town. It'll take us over our salary limit, too."

"We've got to have a fust-class pitcher at any price. You said so yourself. Ain't there no way to hire him and keep under the salary limit?"

"Only one way. We can release one of our other pitchers, along with the utility man we're keeping on the bench for emergencies. If a pinch comes I can go into the game myself."

"Your plan seems all right to me, and I'm for it. We can get along without Heines. Three pitchers is all we've had, anyhow, and they're enough. I say, nail Mercer. We've got to have somebody quick. I just heard to-night that Bristol's signed a new twirler for the Buccaneers. You see, Hank don't propose to let you git the bulge on him."

"Did you hear the name of Bristol's new pitcher?"

"Yep, but it sorter slipped me. It was Eagan or Elywin, or something like that. I'll bet he's a ripper."

"He's probably a good man if Hank's signed him at this late day."

"Well, you see where that puts us. You see what we're up against. We can't expect to get no Big League pitcher now."

"I don't know 'bout that," returned Kennedy

in a low tone, his eyes on a man who was descending the stairs, and who turned at once toward the dining room. "There goes one."

"Hey? What?" spluttered the landlord.

"There goes one of the cleverest young port-side pitchers it has been my luck to see work in a game in the last three years."

"Hey?" spluttered Peter once more. "That feller there? The one just goin' into the dining room?"

"That's the man."

"What you giving me, Jack?"

"Straight facts."

"Why, what's he doin' round here?"

"I dunno. That's what gets me."

"Who is he?"

"He registered as Robert Stranger, but he played under me with the Blue Stockings, using the name of Tom Locke. He was generally called Lefty."

Landlord McLaughlin was in a sudden sweat of excitement.

"Played under you? Then you know all about him."

"I reckoned I knew a lot about him," said Kennedy; "but in the last ten minutes I've sorter changed my mind. Brennan, of the Hornets, got him through a scout early in the season, but Brennan sized him up wrong and let him go un-

conditionally. I'd been after him before that, and I gave him a try-out. He was there with the goods. When I quit, with the exception of Grist, he was the most dependable pitcher the team had. Since then something has happened to him. I dunno what 'tis, but I could tell by the papers that he was goin' wrong. He was in that railroad smash the other day. After the smash he wasn't to be found. Now he's here."

"Well, if you have a talk with him he'll clear things up, of course. He'll explain it all."

"I've had a talk with him. Instead of explaining, he pretended he didn't know me. Peter, he denied that he was Lefty Locke and claimed his name was Stranger, under which he has registered here."

"Jerusalem!" breathed McLaughlin. "That's mighty funny. How do you figger it?"

"I can't get only one solution. It must be he didn't pull well with the new manager. I know Carson, and he's rough on a man he don't cotton to. Lefty was suspended shortly before that railroad smash-up. When that came he improved his opportunity to duck. Fool thing to do, but it must be just what he done, Peter. Mebbe he plans to lay low until Carson gets in a hole and needs him desperate. Then, perhaps, he'll wire Carson and try to make terms. It don't seem to me that the Lefty Locke I knew would try any

such jinks as that, but you never can tell what a man will do."

"By goudy!" said Peter. "If that's what he's up to, mebbe we can get him to do some pitching for us while he's waitin' to pull the thing off. We'd make Bristol go some. Why don't you try it, Jack? You oughter be able to make a deal with him, if anybody can."

Kennedy shook his head. "I dunno," he growled, "I dunno 'bout that. Why, he just said not only that he'd never played, but that he'd never as much as seen a game. He's got me guessing. I'm afraid I can't make a deal with him."

"Then *I'll* try," announced Landlord McLaughlin. "Wait till he comes out from supper. Leave it to me."

CHAPTER XXV

STRANGER GETS A JOB

WHEN the new guest reappeared from the dining room, having finished his supper, Landlord McLaughlin met him with an engaging manner.

"Welcome to our town," said Peter. "We're always glad to see strangers drift in. Smoke?"

He tendered a cigar, which the other accepted in a somewhat hesitating manner. Peter nipped off the end of another cigar and struck a match, which he held for the young man to light up before lighting his own.

"It's rather dry," said the landlord.

"Is it?" said the one who called himself Stranger, taking the cigar from his mouth and looking at it doubtfully.

"I mean the weather. We ain't had much rain lately. Rather bad for crops, though it's good for baseball, and we're interested in that round here."

The young man made no reply, but took another uncertain whiff or two at the cigar. Suddenly he said:

"I don't believe I smoke. I don't care for it, anyhow. If you don't mind, I won't smoke this one."

To McLaughlin it seemed a bit odd that any man shouldn't know whether he smoked or not, but he made no comment as the other tossed the cigar into a cuspidor.

"How's things the way you come from?" he asked. "We always like to meet folks from the big town. Say, won't you come into the writing room and set down for a little chat?"

"I don't mind. I'm a bit tired, but it's rather early to turn in."

Kennedy was watching them from behind a newspaper in a distant corner. He saw them enter the writing room, where the landlord placed a chair for the guest in such a manner that the latter's back would be turned toward the door. Almost immediately Jack rose, and, paper in hand, walked quietly toward the writing room.

"What's your business, if it ain't too inquisitive of me?" McLaughlin was saying as Kennedy reached the door.

"I'm a—a diamond cutter," was the somewhat hesitating answer. "But I had to give it up on account of my health. You can see it has taken hold of me."

Old Peter gave his husky-looking companion a quizzical, sidelong glance.

"Mebbe so," he half chuckled; "but I'd never noticed it if you hadn't spoke. What are you planning to do?"

"A pill slinger suggested that I ought to get out into the country and find a job somewhere in the open air. I'm looking for work on a farm."

"On a farm, hey?"

"Yes, the rural life for mine. Between us, pal, I've hit it up some in my day. Even when I was a boy I was a high flier."

"You don't say so!"

The landlord knew that Kennedy had taken a seat in the room some distance behind them, but he did not look round.

"I always was a wild chap," the young man went on. "When I was a boy I touched plenty of high spots. Cards have tripped me, too. Ever play poker?"

"Ho! Sometimes winters we have a little sociable game of penny ante round here just to pass away the time."

"I've been an easy mark at the game, but I like it. Can't keep away. Every time I get a roll I go searching for trouble. I've got a little wad of long green right now that's burning in my pocket. I'd like to find three or four good sports and get up a game."

"I don't cal'late you can kick up one this season o' the year," said Peter. " 'Sides that, we

generally play among ourselves, not caring to gamble in the reg'ler sense of the word. The strait-laced people round here think that Satan's got a strangle hold on anybody that plays cards for money."

"I was brought up in a strait-laced family, pal. My old man thought cards the tools of Satan. It broke my mother's heart when she found I was playing penny ante with a bunch of youngsters. Maybe that's what finished her. But come, what's the use to talk of things like that?"

"Yep, what's the use? Baseball's the game in the summertime hereabouts. We've got a pretty hot team, I tell you. All we need now is a rattlin' good pitcher."

"The guff I hear and see in the newspapers about baseball makes me tired, bo. Seems like ninety per cent. of the population has gone bug-house about the game."

"Well, that don't hurt 'em. Folks has got to have something for recreation. All work and no play is bad policy. Don't s'pose you know where we could get holt of a good pitcher, a left-hander?"

Locke seemed to meditate a moment as if seeking to recall something, then in a queer way he answered:

"One time I was mistook for a pitcher I happened to look like. A gent blew up and called

me by that ball tosser's name and asked me how I was doing at it. Really, he didn't believe me when I told him I'd never pitched a ball in my life and that I didn't know a curve from a—from a wedge of—restaurant pie."

Old Peter cleared his throat with a rasping sound and shoved round his chair till he could glance at Kennedy, who made a quick, cautioning gesture.

"Then if that's the case," floundered the landlord helplessly, "I don't s'pose you can help us none. I'm sorry. I didn't take you for a minister's son."

"I am," was the prompt assurance. "If I can't help you, perhaps you know where I can get a job on a farm."

"You say you've never done no farm work, but, still, green hands ain't to be sneezed at when help is short."

Kennedy rose and stepped forward.

"I'm a farmer," he said, "and I need a man."

The new arrival in Deering looked up with a slight frown.

"You're the man I met when I first came in," he said. "Well, if you need a laborer on your farm perhaps we can talk business, bo."

"You don't look like a sick man to me."

"My business has been too confining. You can see it has affected me. I don't like confinement."

"I'll give you all the outdoor work you want," announced Jack, "and if you're any good I'll pay you twenty-five dollars a month and keep."

"That suits me. It's a deal."

"All right," said Kennedy; "I'll be in town tomorrow afternoon and take you out to my farm. My name, as I told you before, is Kennedy."

"And mine, as I told you before," said the other, "is Stranger."

" 'Stranger' goes," returned Kennedy. "You can call yourself anything you blame please. It's none of my business."

CHAPTER XXVI

MIGHTY QUEER

KENNEDY wanted an opportunity to meditate quietly upon the peculiar behavior of Lefty Locke, with the hope of hitting on a reasonable solution of the problem. For a problem it now appeared to the old manager.

"There's just one thing I'm afraid of," he said to McLaughlin after Lefty had bidden them good night and ascended to his room. "He didn't expect to run across me here in Deering. It must have been a jolt to him, though he managed to hide it mighty clever. Now, he may take a notion to sneak sudden and give us the shake. 'Twouldn't surprise me if you woke up to-morrer to find your late guest missing."

"He'll have some trouble gittin' out of town before the first train in the morning," declared Peter. "If you think it's worth while, Jack, I'll have Skedge, the boy, set up all night right here to see that he don't sneak out."

"Anything would be worth while if we could only get him to pitch a few games for us."

But if Skedge remained awake and on guard all night in the office of the Central House, he wasted his time. Apparently the new guest had no idea of slipping away, and when he appeared at breakfast the next morning everything seemed to indicate that he had passed a restful night.

Kennedy came in early for forenoon practice at the ball park, but his suggestion that the new farm hand should go out to the grounds with him was not received favorably.

"If you don't mind, pal," said Lefty, "I'll wait for you right here at the hotel till you get ready to take me out to your farm. Baseball doesn't interest me at all."

Jack frowned a bit over that word "pal." It was not like Lefty Locke, and he had noticed that at times since his appearance in Deering the fellow spoke with a touch of slang that seemed quite unnatural and different from his usual manner of speech. There was in it, however, no trace of the slang of the baseball field.

At noon Kennedy, coming back from the park, decided to lunch with Locke at the hotel. During the meal, however, he had little success in drawing the man into conversation.

"Keep bottled up if you can," thought old Jack resentfully; "I'll trip you yet."

The Boobs came in on the two o'clock train, and made straight for the field. Kennedy lingered at

the post office to get his daily paper, and stopped at the hotel on his way out to the park. McLaughlin was waiting for him.

"Tell you what," said the landlord, "this southpaw o' yourn don't propose to earn his twenty-five a month playin' baseball. I've been tryin' to get him out to the game, but he won't budge."

"Let me handle this case, Peter," urged Kennedy, spreading out his newspaper. "I don't quite get his drift yet, but I will. Take a look at this! Here's something more about the unexplained disappearance of Lefty Locke. They can't seem to trace him. Some think he was killed in the smash, but all save one of the dead were identified, and the description of that one don't agree at all with the description of Locke. He was a slim, slender, blue-eyed chap who looked like he was in bad health. That accident, together with the loss of Locke, seems to have knocked the starch out of the Blue Stockings, for the Terriers are eating 'em up in the series. The wise guys think it's going to be a cinch from now on for the Specters to get away with the championship."

"Mebbe that'll interest our friend here," suggested McLaughlin. "He's in the writin' room, watchin' people on the street through the window That's all he seems to do—jest set around and watch folks."

Kennedy found Locke in the writing room. "I say, Stranger," he said, "here's a daily paper that may help you to pass away the time till I get back after the game. Just look it over."

He put the paper in the man's hand with the item regarding Locke and the Blue Stockings folded out; but, after a nod and a casual glance at that page, Lefty turned to another part of it.

Old Jack rejoined McLaughlin, growling, and together they hastened to the field.

About two hours later Kennedy drove up in front of the hotel with his rig, and asked for Mr. Stranger. The latter seemed to be waiting, for he came forth at once, the landlord following closely.

"Well, Stranger," said McLaughlin, as the man got into the carriage, "I hope you take to your job out on Kennedy's farm."

"Thanks, bo," was the reply, as old Jack drove away.

Kennedy had an excellent farm under a fine state of cultivation. Besides the overseer, he kept a stout, hulking boy, and at times, when needed, extra hands were hired. All the buildings were in perfect repair, and painted a clean white. The house was a big, square, old-fashioned affair, with fireplaces and a wide veranda. Kennedy's sister, a widow by the name of Malone, was the housekeeper.

"I'm going to let you take a day or two to get the hang of things around the place," said Kennedy, as he showed Locke into a big, square corner chamber with four windows, two of which opened toward the east. "There's no hurry about your striking in to work, as it's a bit slack just now."

The new man muttered his thanks, standing in the middle of the room and looking around in a manner which seemed to indicate slight surprise over this sort of treatment, which, perhaps, was scarcely what he had expected. Through the open door, as he departed, Jack saw him seat himself by one of the windows, and, with his head resting on his hand, look out at the softly rustling trees, the broad fields beyond, and the little lake on which the afternoon sunshine was shimmering. There was something pathetic and lonely in his pose and manner, and to himself, as he descended the stairs, Jack muttered:

"Queer—mighty queer!"

CHAPTER XXVII

DID HE REMEMBER?

AFTER a hearty supper, at which the new hand met Mrs. Malone, Kennedy invited him out onto the veranda, where they sat while Jack puffed at his pipe.

"You don't smoke?" said Kennedy.

"I don't think so," was the reply.

"Drink?"

"I don't know. I've been a wild one in my day, pal. Hit the high places, and hit 'em hard. Cards were my trouble. I was thinking I'd like to find three or four good sports and get up a little game."

"Well, you won't find them round here," growled old Jack, puffing savagely at his pipe. "Nothing doing, Left—er—Stranger."

The other betrayed no disappointment.

"We'll just sit and talk things over comfortable like," said Kennedy, glancing at him sidewise. "How'd you get the notion you wanted to go to farming?"

"It wasn't my notion; it was the pill slinger's."

"You don't look like there's been anything the matter with your health."

"I'm pale. That comes from confinement."

"You're brown as an Injun—or a baseball player."

Lefty rubbed his head. "I know what I've been told," he said, with a slight touch of resentment.

"Well, don't swaller everything the doctors hand out to you. How do you like my ranch?"

"It's very comfortable. I like it here, only I seem to miss something. It's quiet."

"That's the way I feel. You see, when a man has been in the hot of Big League baseball year after year, it's a big change to settle down this fashion. But we all have to take up something after we've had our day at the game. If I'd ever married it might 'a' seemed different."

"You never married?"

"No," said old Jack, a trifle sadly; "slipped up on that play. Made an error, and another fellow fanned me out. You know, it's mighty easy to lose in a game like that if you don't keep on your toes all the time. I don't often talk about it, but I don't mind telling you how it was."

Lefty said nothing, and the old manager continued:

"She was the only dame I ever got really smashed on, a little, dark-eyed Irish girl by the name of Madge. Met her after a game in which

I was pretty near the whole show, having made two homers, a three-bagger, and a single. She was just bubbling over with enthusiasm, and when she turned them eyes of hern on me, and handed me a smile with her teeth shining like polished chinyware, I just felt that it was all up with me. I was like a busher in his first Big League game, all cold and hot and shaky and queer clean down to my toes. I knew in a jiffy that she was the one for me.

"Well, there ain't no need to string the story out," he went on. "I rushed her for all I was worth when the team was playin' to home. Things went along swimmin', and we had it arranged somehow before I ever knowed just how it come round that we would play the big game together on the same team. That is, we was going to get spliced some time, and I didn't care how soon the job was done. She had another guy that was rushing her, too, before I hove in on the horizon; but I had his groove, and he was fanning every time he stepped up to the plate.

"Now, listen to me, and hear how the whole game went wrong in the ninth inning. My sister Kitty comes on to see me unexpected, and, of course, I spreads myself to give her a good time. Madge didn't know nothing 'bout it, and she sees me blowin' Kit off to cabs and theaters and feeds, and a-kissin' her good-by when I had to send her

home one night sudden on account of an unexpected turn. What did that little hot-headed, black-eyed girl do? She just writ me a red-hot letter, tellin' me what she thought of a deceivin', heart-breakin', double-dyed wretch like I was, and announcin' that she was leavin' town. She didn't leave no address, either. At first I took it as a kind of joke, thinkin' I could straighten things out all right with Madge. But next thing I heard, within a week, she was hooked to the other guy, and I was down and out in the series.

"I ain't never struck one like Madge since, and I ain't likely to; so, you see, here I am—an old bach. It's tough on a man when a girl throws him that fashion, with no chance to explain; but I've always tried to console myself by sayin' that one who'd do such a thing would likely keep a guy in hot water the most of the time when she got him. It's poor consolation, but it's all I've got."

Lefty was frowning as he gazed through the faint purple shadows toward the little lake, on which the afterglow of the sunset was reflected, and he stirred uneasily, passing a hand across his forehead. After some moments of silence, he said:

"Seems to me I've heard of a similar case."

"I s'pose there's lot of similar cases," replied Kennedy, giving a pull at his pipe, which had gone out during the narration. "I was young, and it

broke me up bad. I played so rotten that my manager got sore, and put me on the bench. I took to hittin' the bottle, too. Drank altogether too much until a friend gave me a talking to and showed me what a dumb fool I was. Then I tried to forget it and get back into form again. I succeeded, too, and I've stuck to baseball steady, saving my dollars, with the idea of having something to live on when my days at the game was finished. I am out of it now, though I'm managin' this little Deering team. Kinder got pulled into that. I wouldn't if it hadn't been for Hank Bristol, who's managin' the Buccaneers. He sorter rubbed me the wrong way, and it's my object now to beat him out if there's any way to do it. To beat him, I've got to have another A-one pitcher, and I need a left-hander." Lefty was silent.

"I know the very man I'd like to have," Kennedy went on musingly. "He come out of the bush this year. Brennan, of the Hornets, had him in the South to start with; but Brennan also had another promisin' young slabman by the name of Bert Elgin. It seems that the left-hander and Elgin had some sort of a mix-up at college, and they didn't cotton to each other a great deal. Elgin put up some sort of a dirty job on the other chap, and made him look like a quitter and a useless pup. Brennan was fooled, and dropped him.

"I'd been after him before that, and he comes

to me after being handed the can by Brennan. I sent him out into the bush with a team from which I could pull him in any time I wanted to, and he made good out there. My pitchers started cold, and didn't get into the game just right, so I sent out a hurry call for the southpaw, and he joined the team just in time to pitch in our first game against the Hornets. I took a chance on spoiling him by shovin' him into that game. Had to do it, you know, though I hated to. The proper way to break in a pitcher is to work him against a weak team, and give him confidence by a good chance to pull off a win to start with. It was hard on him, rammin' him into that game against the Hornets, but he come through with flying colors, and he pitched against Bert Elgin, too.

"There was a reporter named Stillman who had it in his noddle that Elgin was responsible for what my left-hander got from Brennan, and he chased the thing down and got the proof, which he hands out to Brennan hisself. That was Mr. Elgin's finish in Big League company. Brennan sent him down into class C company, but he didn't last even there. Nobody seemed to have much use for him, and I dunno where he's faded to.

"Now," continued old Jack, squaring round until he could watch his companion without turning his head. "if I just had that left-handed man of

mine for about two weeks I'd bury the Buccaneers. We beat the Boobs to-day, but they're the weakest bunch in this league. After the game I heard that the Bucks had beat the Stars, and gone into first place by a small margin. We play Bristol's team in Hatfield to-morrow. I've figgered the percentage out to-night, and if we could take a fall out of 'em we'd be tied with 'em to-morrow night."

"I presume that's all very interesting to you," said Lefty, unmoved; "but, having never cared in the slightest for baseball, you'll pardon me if I don't enthuse."

Kennedy made a queer sound in his throat. "Look a' here," he snapped, "was you ever in a railroad smash-up?"

"Never," was the slow answer, coming after a moment or two of breathless silence.

Old Jack dropped his pipe, and groped for it.

"Why do you ask?" questioned the other.

"Oh, nothing—nothing," mumbled Kennedy. "I'm going to turn in pretty soon. You can go to bed any time you want to. We get up ruther early here on the farm."

"Think I'll turn in now," said the other, rising.

In his chamber, half an hour later, having made sure that Lefty had really gone to bed, Kennedy paced up and down a while, his forehead corrugated by a deep frown.

"It gets me!" he finally exclaimed, beginning to

undress. "I can't quite make up my mind whether he's faking or really don't remember. If that last is the case, he ought to have treatment by a doctor."

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NEW PITCHER

ALTHOUGH there was an early breakfast on Kennedy's farm, when old Jack arose his sister surprised him by stating that the new man had been up and wandering about the place for an hour or more.

"I wonder if he didn't sleep well?" said Kennedy.

"I asked him," returned Mrs. Malone, "and he said he slept like a log. He's a fine-looking fellow, Jack, but he ain't no farmer. If you took him for one you got bunkoed."

Kennedy gave her a laughing, knowing wink. "Leave it to me, Kit," he said. "I know my business, whether I'm hirin' farm hands or ball players."

"I'm thinking you'd be much more successful picking the latter," she replied. "You may call yourself a farmer, but it's baseball that's still got the hook on ye."

"Mebbe you're right, Kitty," he agreed. "Mebbe that's why I decided to taper off with this bush league bunch. Perhaps I'm like a man that's

been drinking hard and finds he's got to quit, but it'll kill him if he stops all to once. When the baseball bug gets into a man's blood for fair he never is quite cured. It's a disease, my girl."

"If you'd had a square deal you'd be at it now."

"Don't let that worry you. I knew it was coming some time. Where's this man of mine?"

"I wouldn't wonder if you found him out viewin' the scenery. There's something sort of sad and lonesome about him. He acts like he's lost his last friend on earth. But he's a handsome feller, Jack."

"Now, Kitty, don't be sentimental. I thought you was done with the men?"

"So I am," she retorted, flushing almost like a girl. "Stop your joshing. Me day is over, but I can tell the kind that git the girls as well as I ever could. Breakfast will be ready in less than five minutes."

Laughing, Kennedy went out to search for Locke, whom he found on the veranda. Lefty rose at once when Jack appeared.

"Good morning," he said. "You told me to look around, and I've been doing so."

"Right-o! You're an early bird, all right. It's an appetite you should have for breakfast."

"I haven't any working clothes," said the other.

"I've been trying to think what became of my outfit. Can't seem to remember."

"Don't worry about it. I've got old clothes enough, and they'll do when you want 'em, which won't be to-day. Come in to breakfast."

At the table Lefty was silent, but, whatever else could be said of him, his appetite was healthy enough. He seemed wholly unaware of the occasional glances of interest from the blue eyes of Mrs. Kitty Malone. In every movement he proclaimed himself a person of refinement, and it was only in occasional lapses of speech when he seemed almost trying to remember something, or repeating a lesson that had been learned, that there was the slightest suggestion of anything different.

After breakfast Kennedy gave his foreman some instructions, and later he found Locke waiting for him. Old Jack appeared with a soiled baseball and a glove.

"I may have to get into the game myself to-day," he said cheerfully, "and I'm a bit out of practice. As long as you're not going to work until to-morrow, mebbe you'd throw me a few?"

Lefty frowned, but did not refuse.

"Pull off your coat," directed the old manager, as he paced off and marked the regular pitching distance in the yard. "Here's a flat stone for you to put 'em over. I'll be the catcher."

If he had prepared a trap, the other walked into it without hesitation. Taking his place on the mark indicated, he caught the ball which Jack tossed him, and squared away.

"Take it easy at first," suggested Kennedy, in full remembrance of the smoking speed with which Lefty Locke had dazzled the best batters in the Big League. "As long as you're green, you'll hurt your whip if you start in by wallopin' 'em."

Lefty complied to the letter, and the old manager's eyes glittered with the secret triumph he felt as the young man began putting the ball over with perfect control and apparently without effort. Gradually Kennedy urged him to speed up, and the change made no difference. Wherever Jack held his hands behind that flat rock—high, low, behind the inside or the outside corner—Lefty Locke winged the ball straight into them, so that it was scarcely necessary to make the slightest movement to catch it.

"Say," cried Kennedy suddenly, "I thought you didn't know anything about this business?"

"I don't," was the instant declaration. "Don't think I ever handled a baseball before in all my life." But there was a strange flush in his face and a peculiar light of aroused interest in his eyes, all of which the former Blue Stockings' manager observed with unspeakable gratification.

"Well, if you're a greenhorn, certainly you're a

wonder," said Kennedy, still careful to follow the other's lead. "Say, throw me a drop."

Locke shook his head. "I don't know how."

"Easiest thing you ever tried. Here, I'll show you."

He jogged forward, took the ball, and demonstrated how it should be held and in what manner it should be released with the proper whirling motion to make it drop.

"Now try it that way," he said, returning to his position.

Three times Lefty threw the ball without the slightest indication of a drop, but with the fourth throw, into which he put a bit more speed, the sphere, coming breast-high, took a sudden shoot toward the ground just before reaching the stone which served for a plate. Kennedy, scooping it from the turf, whooped.

"That's it!" he shouted. "Great smoke! That was a peach! It would have had Logie, of the Specters, breakin' his back."

For the first time since his arrival in Deering, something like a faint smile flitted across the young man's face.

"Queer," he said. "I didn't know I could do that. Pitching can't be so difficult to learn."

"It isn't for some men," assured Kennedy. "Give me another."

He snapped the ball wide and high to Locke, who

carelessly thrust up his right hand, stopped it, and permitted it to drop into his left, a movement so familiar to old Jack that he nearly whooped again.

"Give me one just like the last," invited Kennedy, "and burn it. Let it come smoking."

It was like the last, and with only his small fielder's glove to aid him Kennedy lost it.

"Oh, some speed, son—some speed!" he rejoiced. "The left-hander I told you about last night used to have a duplicate of Walter Johnson's hook curve, only it took the opposite twist toward the inside corner for a right-hand batter, and so was a heap worse to hit. Let me show you how he threw it, if I can remember."

Again he demonstrated, and again Locke apparently tried to follow directions. This time he threw the hook with the first effort, and old Jack bit his tongue to hold himself in check.

"That's it!" he cried. "Why, I could make a pitcher out of you—I sure could! And there's more money in it than working on a farm. It's good, healthy business, too. Just what your doctor'd ordered if he'd knowed you could do it."

"How could he know, if I didn't know myself?" was the good-natured question, all the somberness seeming gone from Locke's face—temporarily at least. In every movement he was now a pitcher, the same young wonder who had made such a

record under Kennedy with the Blue Stockings; the same jovial-appearing, resolute, reliable box-man who had made a host of friends and admirers, and had come to be feared and respected by opposing batsmen.

"You throw 'em any way you're a mind to now, and let 'em come," said Kennedy. "You're giving me some practice, all right."

There was life, ginger, fire, and marvelous control in every delivery. The whistlers that left Locke's fingers made old Jack set his teeth and grin painfully as, one after another, they nearly lifted him off his feet. In a few moments the old manager, unprotected by a big mitt, found that he was getting more than enough.

"That will do!" he shouted, dropping the ball, and blowing on his smarting right hand. "Perhaps you never saw a ball game, but, believe me, you can pitch—and I know pitchers."

CHAPTER XXIX

AT THE FIELD

WHEN Manager Kennedy rode into town to take the ten-ten train for Hatfield with his players, Mr. Robert Stranger came with him. Old Jack stopped at the Central House, and found Landlord McLaughlin on the point of leaving for the station.

"Howdy, Jack," said Peter. "I see you've got your new farm hand with ye."

" 'Sh!" breathed Kennedy. "I've induced him to go over with us to see the game, and I'm takin' along an extra suit of mine—one I wore with the Blue Stockings, with the letters cut off."

"You don't mean to say—" gasped Peter.

"I don't mean to say anything now."

"But he ain't owned up?"

"Not a word. It's the queerest thing I ever bumped against—it sure is. We've got to catch that train, so let's be movin'. On the way over I'll tell you about it."

Locke accompanied them to the station, where Kilgore was waiting with his teammates. Some eighteen or twenty Deering fans who could get

away had purchased round-trip tickets, while at least fifty more were on hand to give the Deers a send-off. Kennedy bought tickets, after which he introduced Locke to the players who gathered around them.

"Shake hands with Bob Stranger, boys," he said, calling one after another by name. "He's a friend of mine going along with us to-day."

The locomotive was whistling in the distance when Captain Kilgore pulled at Kennedy's sleeve, and whispered, his back toward Locke:

"Say, Jack, who is this guy?"

The manager made a warning gesture. "Not a word," he cautioned. "It's a secret. He's a southpaw pitcher, and if necessary I may use him in the game against the Bucks to-day."

Toots Kilgore grinned. "Take it from me, it's likely to be necessary," he said. "It's going to be *the* game. They'll fight us like blazes on their own field, and they've got a new man to put against us. Curley won't last; they can steal right and left on Reddy Sullivan, and Heines' whip is broke. You better start your new man on the hill."

"Leave that to me," returned old Jack reprovingly, "and keep your face closed about him. I'll tell the boys anything they ought to know. Don't even hint to him that you think he's a pitcher."

"Oh, I see!" said Kilgore. "You're planning to spring a surprise. Maybe he's some real gun in

the game. Maybe his name ain't Stranger at all."

"That's the name he goes by—now," said the manager of the Deers, as the train roared up to the station and stopped.

The crowd cheered them as they got aboard, carrying grips, bat bags, and other paraphernalia.

"Git this game, Jack—you've got to git it!" cried a big man on the platform. "We need it, and we depend on you."

Kennedy's only reply was a nod, which brought another cheer from the crowd, who continued to make a demonstration until the train pulled out.

Old Jack saw to it that Lefty Locke was seated in the midst of the players, where he remained during the journey to Hatfield, listening with a strange sort of interest to their chatter about the game and the standing of the teams, which to them seemed quite as vital as a Big League race. At times Locke evinced more than usual interest as some chance phrase fell on his ear with a familiar ring, and for the time being the shadow in his eyes was dispelled. Although he had little to say, his manner was that of one who again found himself with his own people, and felt once more the vital throb and thrill of life which is experienced daily by the man who has found the vocation for which he is best adapted.

Kennedy missed none of this, although he took

pains not to give Locke the impression that he was being watched.

"Got him going," mused the old manager, with deep satisfaction. "He tried to duck the game, but the germ is in his blood, and he can't keep away from it. If I need him, I'll have him pitching before the game is finished this afternoon."

Hatfield was a thriving, prosperous place—nearly a young city—in rather strong contrast to the quiet, almost sleepy town of Deering. It seemed presumptuous that a somnolent village like Deering should presume to the championship in a bush league represented by Hatfield, for surely the latter had the advantage, in the way of backing, population, attendance, and general resources.

From the station, Kennedy led his men to Tower's Hotel, which gave them special rates, and furnished the most satisfactory table.

An hour's rest followed dinner; then, as two o'clock approached, the Deers gathered up their trappings, and set forth for the park, toward which the early fans were already turning their faces.

Reaching the field, they entered a dressing room, and began stripping down to don their playing togs. Still with them, Lefty watched and listened after the manner of one to which all this seemed familiar, yet as an outsider.

"There's an extra suit," said Kennedy, plac-

ing his grip on a shelf, and being sure that Locke saw and heard. "Everything a man needs, down to shoes. Perhaps it won't be used to-day, but if anyone should happen to want it, it can be found right there."

Kilgore wondered why old Jack's new pitcher did not get into that suit at once; but, having no small respect for the manager's cleverness, and thinking he knew the sort of game he was playing, the captain of the Deers made no remark.

"There's no rules here to prevent you from sitting on the bench with us, Stranger," explained the manager, as the players were ready to leave for the field. "It will give you a chance to watch the game from close range."

The Deers followed their manager and captain to the field. The Buccaneers had not yet appeared, so the visitors had everything to themselves.

They began practice by "fungo" batting and the catching of liners and flies, cheered only by the little group of Deering fans who had followed them and were waiting to give them encouragement. Those cheers were not the only sounds to greet them, some of the more rabid local partisans shamelessly hissing or groaning. For out in the bush baseball rivalry is almost always intense, and there is little of the fair-minded impartiality among the spectators which sometimes, in a

place like New York, leads the home crowd to applaud famous players of opposing nines.

In less than ten minutes the Buccaneers came forth with a dash, Hank Bristol at their head. In appearance they justified their name, for their blue suits were almost black, and the dash of crimson upon their caps, together with their crimson stockings, gave them a somber, awesome appearance, which was heightened by the husky build of almost every man, and the mocking savageness of their faces. If ever a baseball nine was calculated to win from the awe it would inspire in the breasts of opponents, the Bucks were that organization.

With an assumption of cordiality, Hank Bristol shook hands with Jack Kennedy.

"Sorry for you, old hoss," he grinned, "but you should have known better than to let 'em coax you into the game again."

"Save your sympathy till I need it, Hank," returned the manager of the Deers. "You're old enough and wise enough to know one never can tell what's going to happen in this game."

"I know what's going to happen to-day. We're going to put another nail in your coffin. You're a dead one, Jack, but you don't know it. Why, you don't worry us at all. We're not even going to start our new pitcher against you, and I don't believe we'll need him. Jewett ought to find you easy picking."

"Where's your new man?" asked Kennedy.

"There he goes, walking by your bench now," answered Bristol, pointing.

At this moment a ball, thrown from the field, went bounding past them into the bench of the visitors, where Lefty Locke sat. Immediately he secured it, and stepped forth to throw it to the signaling batter.

The Buccaneers' new pitcher stopped short, and stared in astonishment at Lefty, who did not seem to observe him.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed the surprised man, his eyes fastened on Locke. "It's you, is it? You didn't last so long in big company, did you?" He finished with a sneering laugh full of unspeakable satisfaction and joy.

Lefty looked him over blankly. "Speaking to me?" he asked.

"Who did you think I was speaking to?" retorted the other as he passed on, still laughing.

Frowning, Locke stared after him.

"Who's that man?" he asked, a few seconds later, as old Jack came to the bench.

"That man?" repeated Kennedy. "He's the Buccaneers' new pitcher. His name is Bert Elgin."

"Queer," said Lefty. "He seemed to have an idea he knew me, but I've never seen him before."

CHAPTER XXX

BASEBALL LUCK

THE words were uttered in such a sincere manner that they came near dispelling Kennedy's last doubt. "He'd be a fool to try to keep up a bluff like that," thought the manager, "and Lefty Locke never was no fool."

Aloud he said: "That's the cub I was tellin' you 'bout who put up a job on my southpaw pitcher when he was gettin' a try-out with the Hornets. He can pitch, but he's got a yaller streak, and he's about as mean as dirt."

"Will he pitch to-day?" asked Lefty.

"Dunno. Perhaps so. Bristol won't use him 'less he has to. I see he's goin' to warm up with the others. Keep your eye on him.

"Somethin's gone wrong with the man," he muttered, as he turned away. "It's no bluff. His noddle is twisted."

From the bench, Locke watched the two teams take turns at practice, but for the most part his interest seemed to center in the opposing pitchers,

who were warming up. Having been told all about the crippled condition of the Deers' staff, he realized the probable advantage of the home team with a new man ready to jump on to the slab if needed—a man considered by Bristol a star of the first magnitude.

The critical nature of this game turned out a crowd which filled the bleachers and packed the stands—a crowd bubbling with enthusiasm for the locals, who could obtain an added grip on first position by taking this contest.

And more than nine-tenths of the assemblage seemed to believe such a result a foregone conclusion.

In warming up, Elgin attracted the most attention, for nearly everyone had heard of Bristol's new man. Knowing the eyes of the crowd were upon him, he posed vainly, and finished limbering his flinger by whipping three or four speedy ones to the catcher which caused many witnesses to gasp.

The time for the game to start came at last, and the clang of a bell called the visitors to their bench, while the locals took the field. Then one of the umpires, with a megaphone, announced:

"Battrees to-day: For Deering, Curley and Coffin. For Hatfield, Jewett and Yapp."

At this there was a murmur from those who had wished to see the new man pitch. Elgin, hearing

this murmur and understanding, laughed to himself.

Chick Collins, the Deers' right fielder, was the first man to face Jewett, and, as Collins had the reputation of being a man who "waited it out" and made a pitcher put them over, Jewett started in by cutting the pan with the first ball delivered.

To his surprise, Chick did not take one; instead, he met that straight ball on the trade-mark, and cracked it safely into right, which caused the little bunch of Deering fans to give a howl of joy.

"That's the stuff!" sounded the voice of Peter McLaughlin. "He won't last an inning at that rate. Go to him, Truly!"

Hen Truly, familiarly known as "Yours Truly," followed Collins to the plate, fully instructed by Kennedy. Jewett, a bit nervous, threw three times to first to hold the runner close. Then he wasted two while Truly waited and grinned. Having put the twirler in a hole the batter signaled to Collins that he would bunt the next ball pitched, and the runner was off for second with the swing of Jewett's arm.

Truly dropped a bunt in front of the plate, and stretched himself for first. Jewett fell over himself trying to field the ball, and the attempted sacrifice was turned into a scratch hit when his throw reached first a second too late.

"Where's your new pitcher?" cried Landlord

McLaughlin. "You better put him in right away."

Bristol remained apparently unmoved upon the bench; but Jewett, glancing toward his manager, knew that he was on the verge of getting the hook.

Joe Digg was the next hitter—Digg, the formidable, who still had the highest batting average among the visitors. Jewett feared Digg; yet to pass him now would fill the corners, with no one down, and Hallett, a man almost as dangerous, followed. In this dilemma, wabbling in the effort to get his pins under him, the Buccaneer flinger sought to coax Digg into reaching.

On the first ball pitched, Truly, seeming to forget that second was occupied, shot down the line. Instantly Yapp winged the ball to first, and even as he did so Collins stretched himself for third. Seeing this, the first baseman attempted to cut Collins off by a throw across, and Truly went on to second. By a fine slide, Collins shot under the third baseman, who made a sweeping, ineffectual jab at him, and then threw to second to stop the crafty Truly. Truly was there ahead of the ball, and had the baseman not been alive to the situation, which led him to whip the sphere to the plate without an instant's delay, Collins would have tried to score. As it was, he got back to third a second ahead of the ball, and the delayed double steal was a complete success. With second and

third occupied, a long single in the right quarter would give the visitors a start of two runs.

Out of the corner of his mouth, Hank Bristol spoke to Bert Elgin.

"Take Putnam," he said, "and go down into a corner, and keep your arm warm. I may want you any minute."

Jewett saw the new pitcher and the change catcher leave the bench, and knew what it meant. Desperate, he whipped over a jumper to Digg, who attempted to lace it out, and simply hoisted a short fly to second.

Leaving the bench, Kennedy took Tom Boyd's place on the coaching line, Boyd being the batter who followed Hallett.

"Got 'em going!" grinned old Jack. "Hit it a mile, Hallett! Give 'em a chance to use their new wizard right away." While apparently encouraging Hallett to smash the ball, he gave the signal for the squeeze play, which doubtless would be unexpected at this moment, when everything seemed to indicate the immediate downfall of the unsteady pitcher.

Jewett handed up another. With the first hint of his movement Collins started like a shot for the plate. Hallett lifted his bat, held it slack, and bunted. Instead of falling to the ground, the ball rebounded in a little fly, which was caught by Jewett without moving from his tracks.

Collins, warned by a shout, tried to stop. He saw Jewett with the ball, and realized what had happened. The pitcher, elated, laughed at him; and the sphere was tossed to third for a double play, which put an abrupt end to the fine start the Deers had promised to make. It also let Jewett out of a bad hole through a streak of great luck.

Nevertheless it was probable Bristol would use the new man with the coming inning; and far out in a corner of the field Elgin, working easily with the change catcher, awaited the call.

CHAPTER XXXI

PITCHERS' WATERLOO

ALTHOUGH Bristol said nothing to Jewett, it was sheer luck which kept the pitcher from receiving a call-down by his manager. It was also luck, combined with poor work on the part of Curley, that gave Jewett an opportunity to reclaim himself in the second inning; for the locals got after Curley with such effect that two runs had been secured through hits and errors, with only one man down, when Kennedy pulled the twirler from the mound, and sent Sullivan out. On Sullivan's long swing another run came in before the home team was retired. With this comfortable lead of three tallies, Bristol decided to save his new man for a tight pinch or some other game.

"It's uphill work now, boys," said Kennedy to his players; "but a bunch that can't fight an uphill game is no good. Get after that easy mark, and force Bristol to show us what he's got out there in the offing. Make him use his new colt."

Already the wise old war horse had sent Heines out to keep his flipper oiled, fearing that Sullivan

would prove meat for the Bucks. Despite Jack's urging, which possibly made the youngsters of his team a bit too eager, Jewett got away with it in the first of the second, only one man threatening from third before the side was retired without cutting down that lead of three.

"Now," said Spider Hogan, field captain of the Buccaneers, "it's up to us to put the wood to Sullivan. That old soup bone of his can't keep this bunch in check. Every man that gets on first steals on his swing. Don't forget."

Kennedy also had his fears for Sullivan's "soup bone." He spoke to Lefty Locke, who was watching the progress of the struggle with the keenest interest.

"Reddy can't hold 'em," he said; "nor Heines, either. If I had that left-handed youngster of mine to put in here now the boys would support him, and perhaps they'd tie this thing up sudden before Bristol got cagy and shoved his new man on to the slab. You're left-handed, and you've found out that you can handle a baseball."

"You don't mean—" muttered Locke.

"You know where that grip of mine is containing an old suit. There's everything in it but a left-handed glove, and Collins is left-handed. He'd let you have his fielder's glove. He could get along without it out in right."

"You don't mean—" repeated Lefty.

"I can't tell you any plainer what I mean. Which had you rather do, pitch baseball for me at fifty a week and keeps, or work on a farm at twenty-five a month?"

"If I thought—" Locke still hesitated.

"Let me do the thinking for you," urged Kennedy. "Get into that suit, and watch your chance to take Heines' place warmin' up the minute I have to use him. You can reach the dressing room by going round this side of the field."

"I'll try it," said Lefty, rising; "but don't blame me—"

"There won't be any kicks comin'," promised Kennedy, elated. "I'm taking the chance. You haven't made any profession of being a ball tosser. Go to it."

Thus encouraged, while Sullivan was trying to hold the Buccaneers in check, and getting away with the inning by allowing them only one run, Locke sauntered to the dressing room, found Kennedy's old uniform, and got into it. As he passed Heines, the little pitcher gave him a look, and called:

"It's about time you got into gear if Jack's going to use you to-day. He's worked the rest of us stiff, and the Bucks have grabbed the game already."

Lefty made no retort. Having prepared himself for the field, he waited, watching Heines.

In the third inning the visitors, steadied by their manager, again bumped Jewett, and this time old Jack's form of attack was not defeated by a streak of luck. Jewett, sweating and worried after the first two men had hit safely, lost his control, passed another, hit the fourth with a pitched ball, and forced a run. Still Bristol delayed, and the next Deer, slashing out a clean two-bagger, drove two more runners across the pan before Hank gave his pitcher the hook. Elgin came trotting in from the far corner, and ascended the hillock.

He was greeted by a roar from the great crowd, which brought a smile to his face, and caused him to touch his cap proudly.

"I knew he'd have to do it," bellowed Peter McLaughlin, when the ovation died down. "Go right after him, boys. You can get his alley, too."

Elgin glanced in the direction from which the landlord's voice came, and shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Give that calf more rope, or he'll bellow his head off," he said; at which would-be witticism the local crowd in the vicinity of McLaughlin broke into a chorus of jeers and catcalls.

"A pitcher who talks back," muttered the hotel proprietor, "has a goat to let. We'll get his before the game's done, or I'm no judge."

Elgin found the plate with a couple of pitches, and nodded to the batter, who stepped into his

place. Behind the pan, Yapp, signaling, spoke only for the hitter's ear:

"He's got awful speed. He kills 'em sometimes. Look out for his bean ball."

Following the signal, Elgin whipped a scorcher straight at the head of the batter, who gasped, and ducked barely in time.

"Look out!" cried the pitcher even as the sphere left his fingers. And then, as Yapp handled it and returned it promptly, he said apologetically: "I haven't pitched for a week, and I may be a little wild."

That was enough for that hitter, whose three swings failed to touch anything more solid than the ozone.

"So that's his game in the bush, is it?" growled Kennedy. "Don't let him drive you away from the plate. Everybody stand up and hit the ball."

No one, however, seemed to care to be hit by Elgin's speed, and the new man stopped the Deers in their tracks; which brought him another ovation from the local crowd.

Sullivan started badly by handing one to the first Buccaneer who faced him in the third which the hitter slashed into right for a single. Remembering Bristol's instructions, the runner went down to second on Sullivan's first swing, from which anchorage it would be possible for him to score on the right kind of a safety. Then

Sullivan dealt out a pass, which brought Kennedy to his feet, and caused Heines to come trotting slowly and reluctantly toward the mound.

Lefty Locke, joining the spare catcher, began to warm up.

CHAPTER XXXII

FILLING THE BREACH

LIKE Jewett in the first two innings, Heines was lucky, and the change enabled the Deers to hold the locals, despite their savage efforts to increase the lead.

"Keep after them!" urged Kennedy, as the players came to the bench. "There are six more innings to follow. If you can hit this fellow Elgin at all, and we can hold them where they are, we'll be neck and neck with them to-night, or I've never seen a game of baseball. Elgin has got a jinx, and he'll show up before long. Don't let him put the Injun sign on you with his bean ball."

But, in spite of old Jack's attempt to encourage his batters, Elgin seemed to have the "Injun sign" on the Deers.

"You can't hit him," Yapp told the three batters who faced Buck's pitcher in the first of the fourth. "If you did you'd never get farther than first, for you'd see him tighten like a bowstring. You never could hit a real pitcher, anyhow."

He made them believe it, too. And when a batter thinks he cannot hit a pitcher it is only by the

most remarkable bull luck that he ever gets as much as a scratch single. So Elgin had it easy, striking out two men and fielding the weak roller which the third sent his way.

"Gods of war!" growled Kennedy. "I'll have to get out there myself, and show them how to hit this gink. If they ever fell on him he'd take a sail. Where's Locke? Oh, there he is—at it."

Old Jack watched the work of Heines like a hawk, waiting for the first show of wabbling; for by this time Locke had loosened his wing, and could come to the rescue. Just what he could do against Bert Elgin, Kennedy believed he knew. The old manager remembered that first game with the Hornets, when the two youngsters had faced each other in the Big League; remembered that Elgin had gone down to defeat and disgrace, while Lefty Locke made his reputation under the most trying circumstances a new man could possibly meet. Just now, as on that other occasion, with the great mass of spectators favoring him, Elgin seemed invincible; but with the first cry of "Take him out!" Kennedy believed the yellow streak would show. Would the break in the game lead the local crowd to shout for his removal? While he was going strong the little bunch of Deering fans might howl themselves black in the face without effect.

Peter McLaughlin kept up his efforts to get

Elgin's goat, even though by so doing he was inviting personal injury from rabid Hatfielders within reach of him. And when a scrap starts out in the bush it is liable to make Ty Cobb's whipping of an insolent fan look like fisticuffs between kittens at play. McLaughlin, however, had a mouth, and he was not afraid to use it in Hatfield or at home.

"Shut up, you old toad," commanded an angry spectator, "or somebody will hand you a wallop on the ear!"

"When you come to Deering," old Peter flung back, "you can talk and holler all you please, and anybody that tries to stop you will get into trouble with me. You can't muzzle me here."

Those who knew him were aware that nothing save a sleep jab or a gag would keep him still, and some there were who found amusement in his apparently futile efforts to jar Elgin.

Two more outfield catches promised to let Heines get away with another inning, but, with every man hitting the ball when he put it near the plate, it was his support that saved him to that point. Two safeties, however, landed runners on first and second, and a successful double steal caused Kennedy to shove out the hook again. Then the change catcher told Locke that his turn had come. The crowd watched the southpaw jogging to the slab; only McLaughlin and the Deer-

ing fans cheered him. Following that cheer, Elgin, on the coaching line, called to Pop Doyle, the man at bat:

"Here's a portsider with a straight ball and a prayer. He'll put one over in your groove if you wait, and then you'll show 'em why he isn't pitching in the Big League now."

Doyle, a left-handed hitter, did not like southpaw pitchers, but Elgin had told every man on the team that the fellow who called himself Stranger was a frost; and the batter grinned like a wolf while Locke got the range of the pan with two or three throws, after Coffin had told him the signals.

"There's the fence, Pop!" cried Bristol, swinging two bats, with the expectation of following Doyle. "Get another pair of shoes by putting it over. You've won enough footwear to last you five years already. You can start a little retail store of your own when the season's over. Make Kennedy's new man contribute to your stock."

"You can't get his goat that way," howled McLaughlin. "He's your jinx, and you know it. Give him a cheer, boys!"

The bunch of Deering rooters responded lustily, but their cheer was drowned by the crowd roaring for Doyle to lace it out.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE MAN ON THE MOUND

POP DOYLE rapped the rubber and squared away like a man who believed he could drop another one over the fence any time he wished. This was the time to do it, too. This was the time to break the new pitcher's heart before he could get his feet under him. This was the pinch in the game, with the temporarily faltering tide threatening to flow on and overwhelm the Deers.

Nor was the sympathy of all the visitors with the new pitcher. Curley, Sullivan, and Heines knew that the success of Stranger might mean that at least one of them would receive his release, and, together on the bench, they nursed their ineffective whips, waiting and hoping to see Doyle do things to the southpaw.

What passed in Lefty Locke's mind as he toed the slab and took Coffin's signal not even Kennedy could know. Did he remember other occasions when he had faced batters more formidable than Doyle and felt no tremor of apprehension, or was the past a forgotten blank? Was he at that mo-

ment the Phil Hazelton who had made good under Kennedy with the majors, or was he Bob Stranger, now pitching for the first time in a game of baseball? Did he remember Elgin, whose trickery had so nearly ended his Big League prospects, or was his present rival and former foe absolutely unknown to him? Whatever he thought at that moment, his face revealed nothing. It was as impassive as a mask; the grim, determined mask of one who knew his task and was ready to meet it.

Coffin, having signaled, put up his glove behind Doyle's shoulder, and, as he had thrown at old Jack's hands in the morning, Lefty Locke whipped the ball past the batter's chin and into the pocket of that yawning mitt. There was no attempt to drive the batter back from the pan, yet Doyle, jerking his head away, heard the umpire declare a strike. Instantly he kicked on the decision, and Hank Bristol flung one of his two bats high into the air. The local fans roared their disapproval, encouraged by these movements of the batter and the manager.

"Robbery!" shouted Bristol.

"Robbery! Robbery!" came from the crowd. "That was a ball!"

Coffin, laughing, snapped the sphere back to Lefty, who stopped it with his gloved right hand, and permitted it to drop into his bare left, the old movement which was so familiar to Kennedy.

"That's him!" whispered old Jack to himself. "That's Lefty, sure. Let him get squared away, and they're through scoring. If they don't make another run this inning, it's all off, and we've got 'em going."

Lefty gave little heed to the anxious base runners. He had selected Doyle for his victim, and it was easier and safer to keep after him than to take the chance of throwing to the sacks when it was not necessary to drive the runners back.

Having made his kick, Doyle was satisfied, though Bristol kept it up until warned by the umpire that he would be chased from the game. The next one pitched by Lefty was wide. When it was called a ball, the crowd sarcastically howled at the umpire, and asked him if he was sure it was not a strike.

Peter McLaughlin found it almost impossible to remain on his seat. "You've got him!" the old man shouted. "He can't hit ye, Stranger! He can't see your fast ones. Give him a curve now, and see what he can do with it."

Without looking in the direction of the excited hotel proprietor, Lefty nodded and smiled.

"I'm going to try you with a curve, Doyle," he told the batter. "Let's see if you can win any shoes off it."

Coffin called for another straight one across Doyle's shoulder, but Locke shook his head.

"I told him I was going to pitch a curve," he said. "Mr. Kennedy showed me one or two this morning. I wonder if I've forgotten how to use them?"

"Lay one over anywhere," invited Doyle, "and I'll break the fence."

Even as he spoke, Locke pitched, starting the ball high, and making it take a break across the batter's shoulders. Whereupon Doyle pounded the air for a second strike.

"Told you you had him foul!" whooped McLaughlin. "How can he hit 'em? He can't."

"Make him put 'em across, Pop," urged Bristol. "Don't let him fool you again."

Now, Lefty had deceived Doyle completely by telling him just what he was going to pitch, for the batter had looked for something entirely different.

"Try another," he entreated. "Give me another like that, and see it go out of the lot."

"Well," said Lefty, "I'll do it, if you'll agree to swing."

"Look out for the straight one now!" shouted Elgin from the coaching line. "I know his pitching. That's the way he mixes 'em—a curve and a straight one. That's why he didn't last in the Big League. They got wise to him. Meet it, Pop —meet it!"

But, to the surprise of Elgin, although Lefty swung his arm as if about to waft over a smoker,

he made such a beautiful change of pace that Doyle barely saved himself by holding the bat back on the swing. The slow ball dropped to the ground six inches in front of the plate, and Coffin gathered it on the bound.

"That's two and two," said Elgin. "It takes only one to hit it."

Lefty rubbed his bare hand on the hip of Kennedy's old Blue Stocking pants. "I've got another curve," he observed thoughtfully. "Let me see if I can remember that one."

He threw it a moment later, the hook which dropped and twisted to the far side of the plate beyond Doyle; and again the batter checked himself on the swing, rejoicing when the umpire's decision made it three to two.

"Now," he said, "you've got to put it over or hand me a walk. You don't dare put it across!"

"I'm going to put it across," promised Lefty; "and of course I'll have to use a straight one."

In such a hole some pitchers would have found it necessary to use the straight one. Apparently Locke pitched with that intention. Doyle tried to meet the ball and hoist it over the fence. It was another of those baffling "Johnson hooks" to the outside corner, and he missed by inches.

"You're out!" cried the umpire; and Peter McLaughlin had a fit then and there.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE OTHER PITCHER

OLD Jack Kennedy's lips were pressed together, not a word coming from them as Lefty Locke strode to the bench; but in the depths of the manager's eyes there was a wonderful glow, and he could feel his usually steady pulse pounding with an erratic throb.

"Here's the boy who could have pitched the Blue Stockings to a pennant," he thought; "and Al Carson didn't know a good thing when he had it. He didn't know how to handle the lad."

"Did I get away with that all right?" asked Lefty, with surprising simplicity.

"Huh!" grunted Kennedy. "They didn't score, did they? You ain't heard anybody kickin', have you?"

"He's some pitcher—he really is," murmured Coffin, slipping into place between Sullivan and Curley.

"Oh, wait," muttered the big red-headed pitcher. "He's only had to face one man, and I didn't see that he showed so much."

"The Bucks will size him up in about two in-

nings," prophesied Curley, "and when they do—good night, Mr. Stranger!"

"They've got a real pitcher in that fellow Elgin," said Sullivan. "He struts like a peacock, sure; but he's got speed and slants, and he knows where to put 'em."

"It's my opinion," said Coffin, "that Bob Stranger has got a little smoke himself, and that queer, twisting drop of his would fool old Honus Wagner."

"Yes, it would!" scoffed Curley. "It fooled Doyle once, but wait till next time, Coff—just you wait!"

Even while this brief conversation was taking place, Elgin, still graceful, confident, and filled with ginger by the applause of the crowd, retired Captain Kilgore by the pop-fly route, and took on Buster Brown. Coffin, who followed Brown, began looking around for his pet bat.

"You look to me like a blowed-up bladder," said Brown, addressing Elgin. "Put one across, and see me nail it. But look out you don't blow all to pieces when the bladder's pricked."

"Get his goat! Get his goat!" howled Peter McLaughlin from the stand. "You can get it!"

Elgin gave Brown a contemptuous smile. "Why," he said, "you couldn't hit me if I told you what I was going to throw. This will be a spitter. You never could hit a spitter."

Holding the ball covered by both hands, his head went back with a motion which seemed to indicate that he pasted one side of the ball with saliva. Then he actually threw the spitter to Brown, and Brown missed.

"I'll give you another, you big dub!" said Elgin. "Another just like that. Now, go ahead with your puncturing."

As good as his word, he threw another spitter, and again Brown fanned.

"Say," said the batter, "you're copying the style of Kennedy's new left-hander, ain't you, telling the batter what you're going to throw? You're nothing but a plain copy, anyhow."

Somehow this touched Elgin, and his face burned. "If I was going to copy anybody," he retorted, "I'd take a real pitcher for a model."

"Keep him chewin' the rag," bellowed McLaughlin. "You'll git that goat yet."

Indeed, Elgin was so exasperated that he made a tremendously wild pitch, and, seeing it coming, Brown took a chance, and pretended that he was trying to hit it. With the swing, he let his bat fly to one side, and was off toward first, which he reached before the disgusted Yapp could recover the ball and stop him.

"Oh, wow, wow!" laughed Buster mockingly. "It's a good thing the stand was behind Yapp. They'd never found that wild heave if it hadn't

been. Keep on shooting your face off, peacock. We like it."

"You'd never get to first any other way," said Elgin. "Congratulate yourself."

"Never mind him," called Yapp, as the catcher for the Deers walked out to the plate. "Put a nail in this Coffin. You can do that just as well as you can Kilgore."

"Why, you're a real wit, Yappy," said Coffin. "Why don't you get his umps to call time while you laugh at your own jokes?"

"Speaking about jokes," returned Yapp, "you're one. I heard Kennedy kept you in the game and put you behind the bat for your hitting. Well, you won't fat your average off Elgin."

Now, Yapp really knew Coffin's weakness, and, with Elgin's perfect control, the man was worked for a strike-out, although Brown stole second while this was taking place.

"Don't exert yourself," said Elgin, looking around at Buster; " 'twon't be necessary."

Lefty Locke was the hitter now, and Elgin seemed to have little doubt in his mind as to what he could do with him.

"You thought you was something when you made the Blue Stockings, didn't you?" said Elgin, as Lefty took his place in the box.

"I beg your pardon," returned Locke. "I think you've got me mixed with some other man."

"Oh, you do, eh?" sneered Bert. "Call yourself Stranger now, eh? I sure don't blame you at all."

"Why don't you pitch instead of talking so much?" demanded Lefty impatiently.

"Oh, I'll pitch in a minute," returned the other, nodding to Yapp to signal. "You seem in a big hurry to strike out."

Lefty made no further remark, but waited in position to swing easily at anything the pitcher might put over. Nevertheless, two strikes were called on him, and he had not attempted to hit one, much to the amusement of the great crowd, before he finally got what he wanted. The ring of wood meeting leather brought a gasp from the crowd. It was a line drive straight over the head of Berlin, who jumped vainly for it.

Now, at Elgin's suggestion, the fielders had all been switched round to the left; for, despite the fact that he was a left-hander, Locke frequently hit hard into left field. This movement had brought the right fielder almost in line with that tremendous drive; otherwise he could not have touched it. The change enabled him to make a marvelous running bare-handed catch which robbed Lefty of a three-bagger, at least, and prevented Brown from tying up the score.

"Oh, dear, dear!" sighed Peter McLaughlin, sinking back into his seat. "What a crack!

What luck! Why, that fellow can hit 'em—he just can."

Brown, swinging toward home after crossing third, and being told that it was useless to run, twisted his mug at Bert Elgin.

"Luck saved you that time, Mr. Pouter Pigeon," he said. "You're due to get yours good and plenty before the day is over."

Although he shrugged and sneered, away down deep in his heart Elgin felt a touch of apprehension lest the words of Buster Brown were prophetic.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE STEAL HOME

THE game, which had started out so loosely, and threatened to become wretched at any moment, was now turned into a pitchers' battle, with Locke and Elgin working against each other. Settling down, Lefty became silent, attending strictly to business. At no time, save in the threatening moments, did he seem exerting himself to his utmost. The uproar of the crowd, calculated to disturb his coolness, seemed no more effective than the murmur of a summer breeze.

"If they think they can rattle him in this little one-horse burg," Kennedy whispered to himself, "they should have seen him pitchin' before thirty thousand howlin' fans in the Big League. Why, he's just monkeyin' with that bunch. With him, we can walk away with the bunting, sure as fate."

With him! But what right had he to keep Lefty Locke, under contract with the Blue Stockings? What right had he to hold this man, the lack of whose pitching might prevent the Blue Stockings from taking the championship? Was it not his duty to notify Al Carson as soon as pos-

sible that the missing pitcher had turned up in Deering?

"But Lefty's under suspension," thought Kennedy. "They wouldn't be using him now if they had him. Oh, I've got to talk it over with him, and talk straight. It's the only way."

There was little time for thoughts like these. The locals still held that one-run lead, and Elgin, pitching like a man with life at stake, refused in the sixth and seventh innings to let one of the Deers as much as threaten to tie it up. On the other hand, in both of those innings the Bucks got a runner to second with only one out, whereupon, however, Locke tightened promptly, and there was nothing further doing.

The eighth opened with Brown leading off, and he talked to Elgin a blue streak until the pitcher finally fanned him.

"Go sit down, and close up that hot-air vent," said Bert.

Coffin picked a slant, and smashed it like a bullet straight into the hands of the shortstop for the second out.

Then, again, Lefty Locke stepped forth, and Peter McLaughlin shrieked:

"Here's the man to hit him! Here's the boy! It's all off now! He'll tie it up."

Once more, away down in Elgin's heart, he felt that throb of apprehension. This was the man

who had ruined his chances in the Big League, the man who had seemed favored in everything by luck—Lucky Locke he should be called, Elgin thought. And only for the chance that had brought Hartford over nearly into center field, Locke would have scored Brown on a clean drive the last time up.

"I'll pass him," declared Elgin suddenly. "I'll pretend I'm trying to put the ball over, but I'll pass him."

It was the weak spot, the yellow streak coming to the surface. With two out and no one on the sacks, there was really little danger that Locke could make a home run; yet Elgin was afraid. From over at one side, in the midst of the little knot of Deering fans, Peter McLaughlin seemed to realize Elgin's purpose by the time Bert had handed up the second wide one.

"He's scat!" yelled the old hotel man. "Yaller—yaller! He don't dare put one over! He's quittin'!"

The coachers took up the cry of "Yellow," and Elgin viciously bit his under lip.

"I'll just put one bender over," he decided. "I'll show them that I'm not afraid to slant one across."

Using his curve, he put the ball over; but it never reached the waiting hands of Yapp. Again Lefty met it fairly, and again it went whistling

out on a line. This time, however, neither infielder nor outfielder could touch it. Only for a long rebound from the fence into the hands of a player, who promptly returned the sphere to the diamond, Locke, covering ground like a deer, would have turned the hit into a homer.

McLaughlin and the Deering bunch were howling themselves purple in the face. Old Jack Kennedy, on the coaching line, flapped his arms and laughed at Elgin, whose face was pale as a sheet of paper.

"Why, he knows how to hit you, Elgin. He can do it every time," said the old manager. "If the head of the list wasn't up now, I'd go in myself and pound him across. Collins," he snapped, as Chick came out from the bench with a bat, "if you dodge a bean ball this time I'll fine you a week's pay. Take it on the nut if he throws it."

"If he—if he does," muttered Elgin hoarsely, "you'll carry him home in a box."

"Oh, no—oh, no!" derided old Jack. "Why, you couldn't crack a pane of glass with your swift one. Get hit, Chick, if he throws at you—get hit."

"All right," grinned Collins. "Let her come."

Elgin pitched only once to Collins before something happened. Yapp snapped the ball back, and Bert, catching it with one hand, was kicking a pebble out of the pitching box when a sudden wild yell arose. He turned in surprise, and saw Locke rac-

ing down from third, actually attempting to tie the score by stealing home. And that with the head of the batting order up! The astounding unexpectedness of such a thing took away Elgin's breath, and made him hesitate for a fraction of a second.

Yapp, leaping forward to block the runner off, shrieked for Elgin to throw the ball. Awaking suddenly, Bert threw it. In his haste, however, he whipped it wide, and Yapp was forced to reach in the wrong direction.

Lefty Locke hit the dirt feet first, shot under the Buccaneers' catcher, and scraped one foot across the rubber.

"Safe!" shouted the umpire, his hands outspread.

The great crowd was silent—all save a little bunch led by Peter McLaughlin, who were yelling like lunatics. Elgin, ghastly white, was dumb. It had happened, after all—the thing he feared; this fellow Locke had snatched the opportunity to make him ridiculous before a bush-league crowd. Like poison fire, hatred burned and seethed in Elgin's heart. He did not hear Bristol raging at him from first. His eyes followed Locke as the latter, rising, pounded the dust out of Kennedy's Blue Stocking uniform, and turned toward the bench as calmly as if stealing home was a common thing with him.

CHAPTER XXXVI

STRANGER IS ANNOYED

"GODS of our fathers!" said Buster Brown as Locke reached the bench. "You done it, old boy, and you done it slick. I'll bet that man Elgin goes up so far you can't see him with the Lick telescope."

As for Elgin, he spent some minutes in an apparent endeavor to steady himself; then, when he pitched again to Collins, Chick smashed out a safe drive.

The fusillade of singles and doubles and triples which followed gave the Deers four more runs before Bristol came to realize that Elgin was wholly gone, and sent another man to the mound.

"Got his goat! I knew we would!" rejoiced Landlord McLaughlin. "It's all over but the shouting. Nobody is afeared of the Buccaneers now."

Appalled and silenced by the sudden turn of the game and the amazing and unexpected downfall of their pitching hero, many of the disgusted local spectators crept out of the stand and stole away before the Buccaneers went down to defeat in the

last of the ninth, vainly seeking up to the finish to fathom the delivery of Kennedy's southpaw.

When it was all over, Locke lost not a moment in dashing away toward the dressing room—an action which seemed instinctive or born of baseball experience in other days. He was pursued by the shrill cheering of the little bunch of delighted Deering fans.

Elgin had vanished. Crushed, bitter, unspeakably humiliated, after his removal from the box he had lost no time in leaving the field. He could not realize that retribution had reached forth its iron hand and touched him again, as it will any and all of us who do wrong and have a conscience that must cause us to suffer.

Reaching the dressing room, Lefty had peeled off the old uniform, and was ready for a hasty shower before his teammates arrived. They came in rejoicing, with the possible exception of the jealous pitchers who had failed in the early stages of the game.

"Stranger, of the southpaw!" cried Kilgore, as Locke seized a towel and began rubbing himself dry. "You were there when the hour struck. That steal home broke Elgin's heart. Never saw a man blow up so sudden before. Couldn't touch him before that; everybody hit him afterward."

Old Jack Kennedy came in. "Let me massage that portside flinger of yours, Stranger," he

urged. "We've no regular rubber to look after it, so I'll have to give it what it needs."

Lefty submitted to the massaging of his strong, free-swinging left arm and shoulder.

"How did you happen to try that steal to the plate?" asked Kennedy, as he worked over the man's arm.

"I don't know," was the answer. "Seems to me I've done it before, but of course I haven't, never having played baseball."

"You have played baseball—take it from me," said Kennedy. "Perhaps you've forgotten about it, but you've played the game aplenty."

"Anyhow," said Locke, "something told me to go home when I saw Elgin getting a bit careless in the box. I knew it would tie things up if I scored, and it might put him off his pins. If I failed, we'd still have another chance in the first of the ninth inning. Before I knew it I was streaking to the plate. Of course it was luck."

"Of course there was some luck about it," agreed old Jack; "but it took nerve and judgment. If you'd failed, everybody would have handed you the laugh."

"That wouldn't have disturbed me," said Locke. "A man can't do much if he's never going to try anything for fear he'll be laughed at if he fails. Sometimes a sense of humor helps; other times it hurts."

"That's philosophy," said Kennedy. "Now you're talking like yourself, son."

Indeed, at that moment Locke appeared like the fine, forceful, jovial fellow Kennedy had known him to be, having lost much of his shadowy gloom and all that peculiar style of talk which had bothered old Jack not a little.

Locke was fully dressed and ready to leave when a prematurely corpulent young man arrived at the dressing-room door and inquired for Phil Hazelton.

"Nobody by that name here," he was told.

"Wait a minute," called Kennedy, who had heard the words. "Who's that? The young doctor who follows up the Bucks? I've seen him over in Deering."

"My name is Hetner," said the man at the door. "I'm Doctor Wallace Hetner, and I'd like to have just a word with my old college friend, Hazelton. Perhaps he doesn't call himself by that name in baseball. Perhaps he calls himself Locke. And I see by the score sheet that he was down to-day as Stranger."

Lefty turned and stepped to the door to face the speaker.

"You must mean me," he said. "I'm the Stranger who pitched for the Deers."

"And you're Phil Hazelton," said Doctor Hetner. "I wondered what had become of you, Ha-

zelton. You were on the train with me when the smash came. You were on that very smoking car. I spoke to you a short time before the car jumped the track. Don't you remember?"

Locke shook his head.

"It's a singular thing," he said, "but people get me mixed up with someone else. They persist in thinking I'm some other person. My name is Robert Stranger, pal. I'm a diamond cutter by trade. My health ain't just what it should be, and a pill slinger advised me to get outdoors somewhere and work on a farm. That's how I happen to be here."

Hetner's jaw dropped, and he stared hard at the speaker. At the same time, behind Locke's back, Kennedy clenched his right fist, and his eyes narrowed as he listened to this sudden change in the young left-hander's style of speech.

"That's right, doctor," he said suddenly. "Folks seem to think that Stranger, here, is someone else. Even I made that mistake. It annoys him."

"Do you mean to tell me," persisted Doctor Hetner, his eyes fastened on Locke, "that you weren't on that train when a broken rail sent us into the ditch? I looked for you among the injured or killed, but couldn't find you."

"I never was in a train wreck in my life," said Lefty.

Baffled, the doctor turned away, mumbling an excuse, although not at all satisfied.

"I wish they'd quit that," said Lefty, brushing a hand across his forehead. "I wish they'd stop taking me for some other person. It's infernally annoying."

"It must be," agreed Kennedy, turning to Toots Kilgore. "Toots," he said, in a low tone, "take the boys to the hotel and get supper. If I'm not there, I'll meet you at the train."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE DOCTOR'S DOUBTS

"YES," said Doctor Hetner, sitting in his office, facing Manager Kennedy, "of course it's possible for such a thing to happen. Of course, the man's mind may be affected, and he may not remember his former life and friends. At the same time, he may be suffering under a delusion, which has led him to take a new name and assume a different character. Such instances, although rare, are well known to medical science."

"What brings them about?" inquired Kennedy eagerly.

"Overstudy, overwork, a diseased condition of the body or mind, a sudden shock—oh, numerous things. It has almost a thousand different forms. Psychologists and physicians who make a study of the subject recognize many of the symptoms."

"Have you made a study of it, doc?"

"Not what you might call a thorough study, although, of course, among my books I have many which deal with neurasthenia and its allied forms. Still, I'll give you my word that I never for a moment recognized the symptoms in Hazelton. It

seemed to me that the fellow, when he met me on the train, was simply declining to acknowledge an old acquaintance for reasons of pride or something of that sort. That it was aphasia didn't occur to me. It's likely you know how he happened to go into baseball under a fake name?"

"But there ain't no disgrace playing baseball these days," growled the old manager. "There's as clean a set of fellers in the game as you can find anywhere."

"Nevertheless, prejudice exists in the minds of many old-fashioned persons, such as Phil Hazelton's father must be. To them, playing baseball is a great deal like taking part in a circus performance. They can't see that it has become an honorable, legitimate, recognized profession, followed by hundreds upon hundreds of clean, honest young men. You understand why I doubt this being a genuine case of loss of identity? I believe Hazelton is trying to hide himself under an assumed name and personality."

Old Jack shook his head.

"He ain't no fool, doctor; he can't help knowing that I know him and you know him. Elgin knows him, too. If he was a simple-minded idiot, he might continue to try to keep up the bluff. I tell you, that boy has gone wrong in his garret, and something ought to be done for him. I don't know just how to do it."

"Well, now, look here," said the doctor; "I'm coming over to Deering in a day or two, Kennedy. In the meantime, I want you to try to trip Hazelton. Lead him into some sort of a give-away, an admission, then nail him. Tell him it isn't any use to stick to the bluff."

"And have him get red-headed and tell me to go straight to—well, you know where."

"Never mind that."

"But I do mind. With him pitching for the Deers, we can put ourselves into first place in two weeks' time. I know just what he can do. Talk about John Coombs, the iron man, or 'Cy' Young in his palmy days—why, Lefty Locke is as good as either of them. He can pitch three days running, if necessary; and two or three games a week, with a day between each, is like loafing for him, especially in this bush league. Oh, I don't want him to quit me!"

"I don't blame you," said Hetner, laughing; "but I don't believe he'll quit. Yet, if he belongs to the Blue Stockings, and they're in need of him—"

Kennedy growled. "Then it's up to me, if I'm decent, to let 'em know where they can find him. No matter how I feel about the way I was treated, it's up to me just the same."

"Still," said the physician, "if the man isn't right in his head, it would be wrong for him to go

on pitching baseball without any treatment whatever."

"Treatment?" said Kennedy. "Does treatment always cure 'em?"

"Sometimes it won't do a blessed bit of good. Nothing cures them but a long rest, and, perhaps, a sudden accidental occurrence which flashes back into their brain the realization of their true identity. Sometimes a situation may be successfully planned to bring this about; more often the most skillful planning results in absolute failure. But remember, I haven't stated that Hazelton is a victim of such a delusion."

"We'll find out whether he is or not, doctor," said the old manager, rising. "If he's fooling, I'll catch him at it. I'll let you know right away if I trip him somehow. So long, doc."

Kennedy had time to snatch a bite at the hotel and accompany the team to the station to take the train for Deering. Arriving at the latter place, they were welcomed by a gathering at the station, for the whole town had learned by telephone the result of the game in Hatfield.

"Where's your new pitcher, Jack—where is he?" they shouted. "He ought to be all right."

"He is," assured Kennedy, waiting on the car platform until Lefty was forced to appear. "He didn't let the Bucks have a run after he mounted the slab. Here's Bob Stranger, gents, and, be-

lieve me, he's the man I've been looking for to win the pennant with. If I can keep him, we'll nail it."

"Keep him!" yelled one of the crowd. "If you let him get away, your life won't be safe around these parts!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

FIRST POSITION

OF course, Locke went out to the farm with old Jack, and again they sat on the veranda, this time watching the moon coming up over the eastern horizon. For a long time Kennedy was silent as he smoked, and Locke also seemed busied with his thoughts. The moonlight, creeping beneath the veranda, fell upon Lefty's face, making it seem strangely handsome and strangely sad. Suddenly the old manager burst out laughing.

"Wonder if Bert Elgin will get his release the way he did the first time you went up against him with the Blue Stockings behind you, son?" he said. "You remember what Brennan done to Elgin after that game was over?"

Locke swung round and faced the speaker.

"I don't remember anything at all," he said, "because, as far as I'm concerned, it never happened. Like the others, Mr. Kennedy, you've got me mixed up with another man."

"Mebbe so," said old Jack; "but I don't believe it. Look here, if you ain't Lefty Locke, the boy

who pitched for me when I was handling the Blue Stockings the first of the season, how does it happen that you can go into a game same as you did to-day and pitch like a veteran?"

"That's one thing I can't answer," was the confession. "Of course, you gave me some practice here in the morning, but—"

Kennedy snapped his fingers. "All I gave you didn't amount to that, unless you knew how to pitch before," he declared. "No matter how much you remembered, it was what you didn't seem to remember that was telling you what to do in that game. That's how you could go in there and win for us. I don't know where you picked up the name of Stranger, but—"

"I've always had that name. I'm a diamond cutter, pal. My folks were rather strait-laced, and I was a wild one. They're both gone, and I'm alone in the world."

"That sounds first-rate as fur as it goes," said Kennedy; "but it don't go fur. Where was you born, and where was you brung up? You've got plenty of folks who know about you, of course. Where be they?"

"I was just trying to think," said Locke. "Something has made me forget, but I'll remember to-morrow, perhaps."

"Hope you do," said Kennedy. "If you remember, you'll get it straightened out that I was

your manager. The new owner fired me, and Al Carson took my place. Something happened between you and Carson. You didn't get along. I was watching things in the papers. You was fined and suspended. Then the team was mixed up in that railroad smash, an—"

"Stop!" interrupted Locke, in mingled excitement and confusion. "I can't follow you as fast as that. No use for me to try."

"But you remember—you remember now?" persisted Kennedy.

"Not a thing," was the reply. "I still think you're mistaken."

The following morning Kennedy sent a telegram to Al Carson, of the Blue Stockings:

Can tell you where to find your missing pitcher, Locke.
JOHN KENNEDY.

By noon he received an answer:

Don't want to find him. He's blacklisted for quitting.
CARSON.

"Hooray!" said Kennedy, as he thrust the message into his pocket. "I've done my duty. They don't want him. Now I can keep him—unless he gets cured of a sudden, and goes hustling back to them."

For a time the old manager felt nothing but keenest satisfaction over the situation. Gradually, however, having a conscience, he began to fret

and worry. It was all wrong, he told himself, and the fact that Carson was prejudiced and had given Locke a rotten deal did not excuse him for remaining silent under the circumstances and using the youngster to his advantage. If Locke's mind was affected immediate treatment was what the young man needed—immediate attention by an expert in mental disorders; and Kennedy could not con himself into satisfaction by saying over and over that nothing could be better for Lefty than the peace and quiet of the country, together with an occasional game of baseball to keep awake his interest in a life of action.

"But I'll wait till Monday, when the Bucks come over here," he told himself. "That young doctor likely will come along at the same time, and we can talk it over again. I've got to have advice."

In this manner he pacified his troublesome conscience for the time being.

In the afternoon, playing the Stars upon Deering field, the Deers, with Curley on the hillock, had it pretty much their own way. Danger of release had spurred Curley to do his level best, and in all the pinches he pitched with a skill which made his performance one of the finest exhibitions he had ever given in that bush league.

Furthermore, the snatching of the game from the Buccaneers had inspired the Deers with new hope and fire, and they backed Curley up in an

errorless manner, and hit well. Not only that, but both Sullivan and Heines, before the game started, had asked to pitch.

Kennedy knew what that meant. The work of Locke, and the probability that some one of the others would get his release, had put them all on their mettle.

"Got 'em now," thought old Jack; "got 'em where I want 'em. They'll all work till they drop in the harness, and it's only up to me to keep watch that I don't push 'em beyond the limit."

On the other hand, the Stars were nervous and fearful and altogether too eager. They seemed to realize that the Deers, unless beaten right away, would eventually leap into first place and clinch the championship. A day or two earlier they had feared the Buccaneers most, but the victory of the Deers over the Bucks had brought a new menace to the front; and the former champions, having endured the strain to the seventh inning, went to pieces generally, handing the locals a well-earned but rather staggering victory.

Lefty Locke sat on the bench, again wearing Kennedy's Blue Stocking uniform. He had warmed up a little, although the manager had scarcely a thought of putting him in under any circumstances; and the visitors had watched him with the utmost interest. For surely an unknown twirler thrown into a game at Hatfield by Ken-

nedy, and able to stop the fierce Buccaneers in their tracks, was a real pitcher.

"I wonder who he really is?" the bushers asked one another. "Stranger—that ain't his name, never!"

After the game was over, Kennedy, outwardly calm, but inwardly chuckling with satisfaction, made his way to the Central House, where he found Landlord McLaughlin ready to set out the cigars for everybody.

"Well, say, Jack," called the proprietor, as Kennedy strolled in, mopping his perspiring face, "things have turned our way, sartain. I knowed you could do it if we could only get you to take holt of the team. That there championship is as good as ourn."

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched, Peter," advised Kennedy. "You'll find the Buccaneers and Hank Bristol still in the game. Of course, they put the Boobs to the mat to-day, but our winning from the Stars keeps us neck and neck with 'em, and ready to step into fust place before we go under the wire at the finish. To-morrow we'll have a crack at the Boobs, and Monday we get another swing at the Bucks right here to home. Monday I'll pitch Stranger again. Watch him trim them, if the boys back him up the way they did Curley to-day."

"Say, Jack," chuckled the old man behind the

cigar counter, as he put forth box after box, "this town is sartain red-hot baseball crazy right now. Talk about Deering being dead! Why, it's the liveliest little burg between the two oceans. Mark me, next Monday we'll have out the best crowd that has ever seen a baseball game in these parts."

From a near-by booth came a sharp call of the telephone bell.

"Mebbe that's the report of the game at Somerset," said McLaughlin, leaving the cigars for anybody who wanted them to take one or a handful, and turning toward the booth. "I'll just see if 'tis, and find out how bad the Buccaneers beat the Boobs."

He entered the booth, and closed the door. Those outside heard him shouting into the receiver a few minutes later: "What? What's that? Say it over. Ain't you got that wrong end to? Well, I swan to man! Good-by."

The minute he could push open the door and stick his head out, he cried:

"The Bucks have gone up! The Boobs beat 'em four to two. We're at the head of the league Hooray!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

A TROUBLED MIND

A PERSON who has never had any experience with baseball in the bush can scarcely realize the effect upon Deering of the knowledge that the local team had jumped into the lead and stood more than a fair prospect, managed by Kennedy, of winning the championship. The place, which ordinarily seemed rather sleepy and lifeless, suddenly seethed. Almost everyone, save crabbed old men or cranks prejudiced against the game, talked baseball, praised Kennedy, and speculated concerning his new left-handed wonder, who had beaten the dangerous Buccaneers.

On Saturday afternoon the crowd that came streaming out to the field gladdened the hearts of the team's backers by the manner in which they forked over their quarters at the box office. A flow of silver poured in, and the Deers, who had once seemed likely to end the season several hundred dollars in debt, saw a prospect of coming out ahead in finances—a prospect which made everyone rejoice.

Of course Lefty Locke was the hero of the day.

Everyone stared at him. The girls whispered and giggled as they looked in his direction, and even young married women discreetly ventured to say that they considered him a very handsome man. There was something about his reserved bearing, the melancholy touch in his face, and the somber shadow in his eyes which seemed poetical and fascinating to those of the fair sex who observed him.

In some manner, stories about him began to be whispered around. It was suggested that he had a broken heart, caused by some foolish girl, who had thrown him over for another man. Another story was that he was mourning for his sweetheart, who had died. The one humorous yarn of the lot was that he was a married man and the father of several children.

But no matter what baseless speculation was circulated, each and every one of these stories simply made him seem all the more fascinating and attractive to the young women of Deering.

But Lefty favored not one of them with more than a passing glance, and never in his eyes was there as much as a twinkling light.

They had a chance to see Locke in action in the ninth inning, when, after pitching a great game to that point, Sullivan let down a little, and the Boobs, scampering over the sacks as they chose, threatened to snatch victory from defeat.

Old Jack was watching every turn like a hawk, and promptly he pulled Sullivan from the mound, and sent out Locke, who had warmed up once before and once during the game, but was now cold.

With one man down, Lefty took the next two batters in hand, and buried the whooping, aggressive Boobs in short order. The first man he fanned, and the next he forced into putting up a little pop foul back of first base, which ended the game.

Coming down from the park, half an hour later, Locke was surrounded and pursued by at least twenty youngsters, who openly discussed him for his own ears to hear, all agreeing that as a pitcher Christy Mathewson had nothing on this great southpaw.

Ordinarily this would have provided no small amount of amusement for Lefty; now, however, he scarcely seemed to hear or see any of them as he strode along, his expression one of troubled thought.

Was it possible that he was beginning to realize that his name was not Robert Stranger, and that, for all his protestations that he had never played baseball before coming to Deering, he had a past upon the diamond? At any rate, he moved like a shadow among those admiring people of Deering —among them, but not of them.

Sunday followed—Sunday on Kennedy's farm. Old Jack made a suggestion about church, but Locke shook his head, saying he did not care to attend. And all day long he wandered restlessly about the farm, or sat idly on the veranda, declining to read, apparently striving to think—to think.

"The poor boy's worried, Jack," said Mrs. Kitty Malone. "It upsets me complete to see him this way."

"Kit, I never thought the sight of any man would upset you again," returned her brother. "I thought you'd had enough of them."

"So I have. But this is different—this case. He's only a boy. I feel like a mother toward him."

"Yes, you do!" laughed Kennedy. "Oh, yes, you do—not. Why, you're not so much older, Kit—not more than ten year, and he really is almost a boy."

"But ten year," she said sadly. "If 'twere t'other way 'twould be different. Do you know what's on his mind, Jack?"

"I'm not sure," he replied; "but mebbe I could make a guess. He had a girl once, if I remember right."

"Once!" she exclaimed. "I'm jealous this minute. But, then, I don't see how he could help

having twenty of them. What's become of her?"

Kennedy shook his head. "Ask me!" he said. "There's a whole lot about Lefty Locke that I'm guessin' at."

"Lefty Locke? He calls himself Stranger."

"A man can call himself anything he pleases; there's no law against it."

"It's a real pitcher he is, Jack?"

"Sis, you should have seen him pitch against Bristol's Bucks! If you want to, you'll have a chance to see him pitch against them Monday. I'm going to put him in. You should have seen him pitch for the Blue Stockings. They lost the best man on the staff when they lost him, but Al Carson is such a pig-headed chump that he won't acknowledge it. He'd rather lose the pennant than own up that he'd made a mistake."

"And that's the man they threw you down for, Jack, is it—after you'd won the championship twice before? It's always the way in this world. The one who delivers the goods is thrown down for another who's got the cheek to crowd himself in."

"Not always the way, sis," contradicted Kennedy, shaking his head. "It sometimes happens so, and when it does pessimists are inclined to say it always happens."

"What are these pessimists ye speak of?" she

asked quickly. "I don't think I ever met one of them."

"You were a bit inclined to be one yourself," he replied, "until Robert Stranger came to the farm."

CHAPTER XL

THE REPORTER

EVERYONE had heard that Locke would pitch again on Monday, and, having seen him wind up the game for Sullivan, their curiosity and interest was whetted to the highest point. Doubtless Bristol would be fierce and determined to get back into the running by downing the Deers, and perhaps he would use again his wonderful new pitcher, who had held the Deers scoreless until Stranger stole home on him in the eighth inning. Naturally that man would be more than eager to retrieve himself in another struggle against Locke.

Kennedy was on the steps of the Central House when Bristol, accompanied by two or three of his players, came hustling up from the railroad station.

"Hello, Hank!" said old Jack, in a friendly way. "Glad to see you."

"Hello!" growled Bristol. "I s'pose you are. I'd be, if I was in your place. Say, you've been having luck, ain't yer? You put the jinx on us, all right. Think of it, being beat by them Boobs!

We've got to git back at you to-day, and we're goin' to come blame near doing it, too!"

"That sounds interesting," returned Kennedy. "I suppose you'll pitch Elgin again?"

"Elgin be—hanged!" rasped Bristol.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"He's quit."

"Quit?"

"Yep. That feller was yaller all the way through. He went to pieces like a stick of dynamite. Didn't even wait to collect the few dollars that was due him. Jumped a train and got out."

"Well, he *was* a quitter," agreed Kennedy. "I'm really sorry for you, Hank. It makes a man sore to be stung in his judgment of a pitcher that fashion."

"Don't seem that you got stung much in that feller Stranger. Say, who is he, anyhow? You must 'a' had him yarded out in the outlaws somewhere, or back in the bush, with a string on him, so you could yank him in any time you needed him."

"I had him with a string on him, all right," confessed Kennedy.

"I thought so. Well, we're going after him to-day. He can't repeat on us. All the boys are just itching to have another crack at him."

"You'd better buy some ointment for that itch-

ing, Hank. I judge they'll still need it after the game's over."

"Mebbe so," said Bristol, walking on, "but I doubt it."

He was not twenty feet away when a young, clear-eyed man came hurrying toward Kennedy, who had turned to call McLaughlin from the hotel.

"I beg your pardon, Jack, old man," called a familiar voice. "Recognized you a block away. So this is the way you're farming, is it?"

Kennedy, whirling sharply, found himself gazing into the eyes of Jack Stillman, the *Blade* reporter.

"Hello, boy!" he exclaimed, grasping the newspaper man's outstretched hand. "What are you doing here?"

"Hush!" chuckled Stillman, making an extravagant gesture of caution. "I'm doing a little Sherlock Holmesing for the *Blade*. I've followed a trail that has led me right here to this town of Deering."

"You don't say!"

"Oh, yes, I do. I repeat."

"Who are you after?" Although Kennedy asked the question, he knew the answer in advance.

"I suppose you've been reading the papers right along?" said Stillman. "Then you've seen all about the railroad smash, and how Lefty Locke hasn't been found since that happened."

"I read about it."

"It was proved that he wasn't among the killed or injured, so, of course, he simply improved that opportunity to fade away. You know, he and Carson didn't seem to get along right well together. Carson favored Grist, and Grist had some feeling about Locke."

"I thought I had that pretty near cured before they took my scalp," said Kennedy. "Grist was the veteran with the experience, but he was on the point of going backward. Locke was the youngster without experience, but he was coming like a whirlwind. Both had their supporters, and there were a few who tried to remain impartial. It affected the playing of the team, and I was working hard to restore harmony just when they handed me mine."

"Well, there's not much harmony left now, and Locke's gone," said the reporter. "The Blue Stockings are getting it right and left, and only for the fact that the Specters have had a bad streak they would be out of the running already. The loss of Locke has put the whole team on the blink. Take it from me, Charles Collier is getting sore himself, and there's liable to be something didding any day. Meantime, I am trying to locate Lefty Locke. Where is he, Kennedy?"

"He'll pitch for me this afternoon," answered old Jack.

CHAPTER XLI

THE MAN WHO KNEW

"CALLS himself Stranger, does he?" muttered Jack Stillman, as he watched the work of Locke from amid the crowd, having taken pains to keep away from the bench of the Deers. "Pretends he's forgotten his right name or something like that, hey? The whole business is queer. But he can pitch—he can pitch as well as he ever could. If the Blue Stockings had him, with old Jack handling the team, they'd have the championship nailed already."

Besides Stillman, another man was an intensely interested spectator of Lefty Locke's work on the mound. It was Doctor Wallace Hetner, of Hatfield, who, according to his promise to Kennedy, had come over with the team. As far as possible during the last few days, Hetner had spent time in meditating upon Locke's singular behavior, and now he watched the man for some sign, some indication which would denote that he was actually the victim of a mental disorder.

"He doesn't look like a sick man," decided the

doctor. "He doesn't show it. But there's something decidedly wrong, or he'd not be calling himself Stranger. I wonder if Kennedy has succeeded in leading him into a give-away?"

He found the old manager, and called him from the bench. With the game running all in favor of the Deers, Kennedy did not hesitate to answer Doctor Hetner's call.

"Oh, he's Lefty Locke, all right," he said. "Ain't no question about that. No, couldn't make him admit a thing, but I know what I'm talking about. Say, there's another man here in town who knows him well—a reporter by the name of Stillman. You two ought to get together and talk it over. I'll find Stillman, and introduce you after the game."

"Thanks," said the doctor.

Despite Bristol's threat, the Buccaneers could do nothing with Lefty Locke; but in turn one of Bristol's regular pitchers succeeded in holding the locals down to three hard-earned runs.

Hetner, Stillman, Kennedy, and McLaughlin held a consultation in a private room of the Central House after the game was over.

"I haven't said a word to Lefty yet," said the reporter. "I've kept away from him. Whatever his reason for ducking off the map, he's certainly keeping himself in A-one pitching trim. I told Collier I'd find him."

"You told Collier so!" exclaimed Kennedy. "Didn't he know where Locke was?"

"No. How would he know?"

"I wired Carson three days ago that I could tell him where to find his missing southpaw. He answered that he didn't want to find him. I supposed he told Collier about my message."

"Don't believe he chirped a word of it," said the reporter. "Carson's making a mess of the management. The team misses you, Jack—it certainly does."

"No bouquets," protested Kennedy.

"I'm not throwing any; I'm giving it to you straight. They miss you and Lefty Locke. I've been thinking of something odd. There was a man killed in that train wreck who passed sometimes under the name of Bob Stranger. He was a crook and general confidence man—Pink Kelly—who had just been released from the pen. For some time nobody recognized him, so his name was not given in the first newspaper reports of the identified. I was the one who finally recognized that gink. Bob Stranger! Locke calls himself that?"

"That's what he does," replied Kennedy.

The reporter struck the fist of his right hand into his open left palm.

"I'll bet you a thousand dollars," he cried, "that Locke and that crook were talking together before the smash came. That smash must have

knocked everything out of Locke's head. He'd been going a bit wrong for some time before that, and that might be the very thing to put him all to the bad. Why, do you know, some of the fellows even thought he'd taken to drinking. I've an idea I really know what's at the bottom of the whole trouble."

"Then you'll be mighty valuable in straightening this mess out," said Kennedy. "What was at the bottom of it?"

Stillman then told them of Lefty's deep interest in Janet Harting, and explained how the misunderstanding between them had been caused by Locke's innocent attentions to the daughter of the new owner of the Blue Stockings.

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Doctor Hetner excitedly. "I think I can see a method of straightening the man out and bringing back his memory. If I had a picture of that girl—the one he's really struck on—"

"I've got it," laughed the reporter. "Say, I scented a corking old news story in this affair, and so I just took care to get Miss Janet Harting's photograph, as well as one of Miss Virginia Collier. By the way, there's a fourth party mixed up in the business—a young man by the name of Franklin Parlmee. It seems that he had a case on Collier's daughter, and they quarreled. It didn't seem to shake her much, but he was raw as

a flea-bitten pup, and he didn't lose an opportunity to soak Locke to old man Collier."

"Something of a romance, I declare!" said Doctor Hetner. "You say you have Miss Harting's photograph? Have you brought it with you?"

"Sure!"

"Will you let me have it?"

"You bet, if you'll return it. I wouldn't lose it for anything. If I write the story—"

"It's an interesting story," said the doctor, "and I suppose you'll write it, anyhow, being a reporter."

CHAPTER XLII

FAILURE

KENNEDY found Locke, and brought him to that room, where the young southpaw was met by Stillman, while the doctor and landlord looked on.

"Of course you remember me," said the reporter, wringing Locke's unresponsive hand. "You know how I got the proof on Elgin, and showed him up to Brennan. I knew you'd make good in the Big League, and I never lost a chance to say so."

"It's mighty good of you to talk like this," returned Locke, "but you wouldn't if you knew how you confuse me. If I'm the man you think me to be, how is it I only remember that my name is Robert Stranger, and that on account of my health I came out into the country to get a job on a farm?"

"Pink Kelly, a card sharp, crook, and con man, was talking to you just before that railroad smash-up. Sometimes Kelly went by the name of Bob Stranger. He was killed, but you seemed to escape without as much as a scratch."

"I don't remember it," persisted Locke, shaking his head. "If I wasn't hurt in that smash-up, what made me so twisted? For I'm twisted, or you are, every one of you."

"Perhaps," said Doctor Hetner, "the railroad smash simply completed what was gradually taking place before that. I saw you on that smoking car. I spoke to you, but you didn't recognize me. I thought you were lying. Now I'm inclined to believe you were honest."

"Thank you," said Lefty, on whose forehead little beads of perspiration were standing thickly. "It's a rotten thing for a man to get twisted the way I am. I've tried to remember, but the more I try the less I can recall."

"There are reasons," said the doctor, "why you should strive to recall the past."

"The principal reason," said the reporter, "is Miss Janet Harting. Don't you remember her, Lefty?"

Locke brushed his hand almost fiercely across his forehead. "No," he answered, "I don't remember her."

"I have a notion," said Stillman, "that you are engaged to her, though there was a quarrel or something of the sort, brought about by your being seen with Virginia Collier—old man Collier's swell daughter. I don't know just how it came round, but Miss Harting failed to accept your ex-

planations, if you made any. That broke you up. Now can't you remember?"

"No, not a single thing!" answered Lefty, in deep distress. "It's all as if it never happened to me."

"If you saw the girl!" cried Stillman. "Doctor, where's that photograph you took from me?"

"Here it is," said Hetner, handing it over.

The reporter placed it in the hands of Locke, who gazed long and hard at the pictured likeness of one who had seemed to him the most beautiful of all girls.

"It's no use," he declared, after some minutes of tense and breathless silence. "If I ever saw her, I have no recollection of it, and therefore I might as well never have seen her. It drives me desperate, trying to remember, and I must stop—"

"That's right," said Doctor Hetner, who had been watching him closely. "It will do no good, this straining after what your mind refuses to recall. When it comes, if it does, it will come easily and suddenly, when you're not trying to break down the wall that shuts you off from the past. Some day you'll shake the identity and the name of the dead man, and become yourself again; and it's both dangerous and useless to make further efforts until your mind is in condition to grasp the truth and revive the past."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE COME-BACK

JACK STILLMAN went in search of Janet Harting, while Lefty remained pitching for Jack Kennedy under the name of Stranger. As a mascot and a winning pitcher, he proved to be such a success that, with the close of the season a week away, the Deers were entrenched in first position beyond any possibility of dislodgment.

Meanwhile, the Blue Stockings were being battered, and their lead cut down, until even old Pete Grist lost heart, and bewailed the missing southpaw.

"Another week," he groaned; "another week, and we've got to win four games out of six to home, with no pitchers. If we get two of them games we'll do well. If we had Locke in trim we could take them. I'll agree to win my share. Carson has failed, and the old man's sore. After all, Kennedy was the best manager the Blue Stockings ever had."

To make matters worse, Carson and Collier quarreled violently.

About this time Stillman, whose place had been filled by a cub for nearly two weeks, came back, and interviewed Charles Collier. Although the reporter had made his business a secret affair, more than one of the Blue Stockings guessed that he was searching for Lefty Locke. Daily the *Blade* was scanned for some word which would indicate that the clever reporter-detective had made progress in this search, and daily those in looking for that word were disappointed. Stillman was taking the chance of being scooped in order to spring a big sensation at the most dramatic moment. He did not even dare tell his editor what he had learned.

The almost hopeless fight of the Blue Stockings aroused the sympathy of the fans, even while the management of Al Carson was bitterly criticised, and also the judgment of Charles Collier in letting old Jack Kennedy go in order to fill his place with a man like Carson.

Pete Grist had made good by winning two games of the last six. He even saved another game when three of the battered pitchers had been pounded out of the box. Then followed two defeats, and upon the day before the final and deciding game was to be played Stillman sprang his sensation in the *Blade*.

He announced that Carson had been permanently shelved by the owner of the Blue Stockings,

who had sent a distress call to the old manager, Jack Kennedy, receiving in reply the assurance that Kennedy would be on hand early in the morning, and would bring with him a cracking portside pitcher by the name of Stranger, who had been doing marvelous work out in the bushes.

Stillman wrote, in conclusion:

> I've seen this Stranger pitch, and, believe me, he's able to deliver the goods. He's the equal of Lefty Locke when Locke was at his best. If Stranger can pitch a winning game for the Stockings to-morrow, the championship is ours after all, and old Jack Kennedy will have saved the day at the last moment.

Forty-eight hours before this article appeared in print, Lefty Locke, pitching for the Deers, had, while batting in the ninth inning, been hit full and fair on the head by a pitched ball delivered with all the speed the man on the slab could command.

Locke sank to the ground without as much as a gasp. In a moment he was surrounded by a number of his teammates. Kennedy lifted the stunned man's head, calling sharply for water.

"He ought to have a doctor," said someone. "Perhaps his skull is fractured."

"I don't need a doctor," declared Locke, suddenly sitting up. "I'm all right. A little tap like that never hurt anybody. Donovan hasn't got much speed to-day."

"Donovan!" exclaimed Kennedy. "Why, that's Colfax pitching."

Locke looked at the old manager queerly. "Colfax?" he muttered. "Who's Colfax! Never heard of him. The Specters are ahead, aren't they?"

"Where do you think you are?" choked Kennedy, his excitement growing. "You're playing the Semour Stars, out in the bush. You're pitching for the Deers, of Deering."

It was Locke's turn to appear bewildered. "I don't think I get you right," he muttered blankly. "What are you doing here, anyhow? Carson is managing the team now."

"Not this team, he ain't," retorted old Jack. "Look here, Lefty, has that bump on your bean put you right again? Who are you? What's your name?"

"Why, my name is Hazelton, though I'm playing the game as Tom Locke. What a blame fool question, Kennedy!"

The old manager showed his satisfaction, and did a dance which caused the crowd to stare at him in wonderment.

"You're all right now, Lefty, old boy! You've got your noddle cleared up by that bean ball. I'll bet you got one on the koko some other time, and that was what started you wrong to begin with."

"Wrong? What do you mean? How wrong?" asked Locke, gazing around in surprise at his

strange and unfamiliar surroundings. "What am I doing here?"

"Playing baseball. I told you a minute ago. You're Bob Stranger. Anyhow, that's what you called yourself when you came to me, and you swore you didn't know how to pitch and had never seen a game of ball."

"Jack, you're stringing me. I don't remember how I got here, but—"

"Play ball!" cried the umpire. "Shall we give you a runner, Stranger, or will you stick in the game?"

"If you're speaking to me," returned Locke, "I'll stick in the game. That tap on the head didn't jar me a bit."

In proof of which, after jogging down to first, he stole second on the first ball pitched to the next batter, and came home with the winning run when a right-field single followed.

That night Kennedy did his best to explain everything to the satisfaction of Locke.

"I wonder what the team thinks of me?" murmured Lefty. "They must figure that I'm just about as yellow as Bert Elgin himself. I wouldn't quit because I was suspended—not in my right mind, anyhow. I don't blame Carson for being raw and letting me go."

Kennedy pulled a yellow envelope from his pocket, and produced the message it contained.

"Carson's done with the Blue Stockings, anyhow," he said. "Here's a wire from Collier, asking me to come back and take the management of the team. I can get there just in time for the last game. If we win that game we get the pennant. What do you say, Lefty? Will you pitch it?"

"Will I!" cried Locke. "All I want is the chance!"

"It's yours," declared Kennedy. "You'll pitch, son."

CHAPTER XLIV

BACK TO HIS OWN

NOT once in a thousand times does such a remarkable situation arise in Big League baseball. Not once in a thousand times would it happen that the two leading teams should be scheduled to play off the last three games of the season together, and have the championship depend upon the result of the final game, which would leave one or the other of those teams in the lead by a very small percentage.

To down the Blue Stockings the Specters had to win three straight, and when they had taken the first two the entire baseball world was thrown into a great tumult of excitement, to say nothing of the home city of the Blue Stockings. That city was in a perfect panic, so that business generally was tremendously effected, and all one could hear talked anywhere he went was baseball, baseball, baseball.

The newspapers were crammed with it. They were almost savage in their denouncement of the new owner and his judgment in displacing Jack Kennedy and filling the position with a manager

like Al Carson. Half of them prophesied that the Specters would take the last three straight, and cop the pennant without difficulty. A few held desperately to the tattered border of hope, begging the Blue Stockings to brace up and save the day by winning the final game.

But even as they did this, they confessed that the team's staff of pitchers was all to the bad, with no one in condition save old Pete Grist, who had already won two games out of the double series of the final week, and was therefore unable to attempt to pitch another game.

On the other hand, the Specters had Donovan in reserve, and during the season Donovan had made a record scarcely second to any Big League pitcher. The baseball "dope" in the papers was certainly interesting enough to a genuine fan, though it must have seemed maddening to a reader who cared nothing whatever for the game.

Then came the sensation sprung by Stillman in the *Blade*. It made readers generally sit up and take notice. The other newspapers had been "scooped." Stillman's sense of the dramatic and his judgment regarding the psychological moment had stood him and his paper in good stead.

And when, just as the game was beginning the following day, the *Blade* appeared with the statement that the pitcher called Stranger, whom Ken-

nedy had brought with him, was none other than Lefty Locke himself, following with a most cleverly written explanation of the cause of Lefty's vanishing, a complete account of his chance meeting with Kennedy, and how he had pitched in the bush league, winning the championship for the Deers, the scoop was complete.

Never in the history of the game in that city had such a crowd swarmed to the ball park. At daylight a dozen or more tired, sleepy-looking men and boys were seen in line at the bleacher gates, waiting in order that they might be the first to gain admittance and so secure favorable positions. Before eleven o'clock in the forenoon two or three hundred people were waiting at those gates, and the steady influx began when the gates were finally opened ahead of time at twelve-thirty.

Fortunately the police department was on the job, and the crowds were handled beautifully outside the grounds. On the field, at least forty policemen found themselves busy when at last the stands and bleachers overflowed, and the people began to swarm into the field back of the ropes, which had been stretched in anticipation of this very occurrence.

It was, however, a remarkably tractable crowd. Even those who had bought seats in the stand and found those seats occupied, as well as the bleachers packed—being compelled, therefore, to stand

in the jam back of the ropes—were good-natured, few complaining.

This was the day—the great day! Jack Kennedy had come back, and brought with him Lefty Locke. They were waiting for Kennedy and Locke to appear, and as they waited they choked down and held back the cheer which welled from their rejoicing hearts. Presently from the clubhouse the Specters came pushing through the gathering mass of people, and burst upon the field. They were given an ovation by their admirers.

Two minutes later there was a tremendous stir all through the stands, running over the bleachers and into the group of standees. Escorted by six policemen, Kennedy and Locke were coming, with the Blue Stocking players at their heels. Other policemen fought the crowd back, and made a lane for them to pass through.

And when they debouched from that lane upon the open space of the field inside the ropes, it seemed that every human being upon the bleachers and in the stands had risen and was howling like a maniac. Such a solid roar, such a tremendous burst of sound coming from human throats, perhaps never was heard save at some gladiatorial contest in the Roman Colosseum. It beat and reverberated upon the eardrums with painful fierceness, causing more than one person to protect himself from the staggering effect of it by

clapping his hands over his ears. And it continued while old Jack, bareheaded, with Lefty Locke at his side, marched from the ropes to the bench, his face pale, his eyes shining, his lips smiling.

"They're glad to get you back, Jack," shouted Lefty in the old man's ear.

"You blame fool!" yelled Kennedy in return. "They're not cheering for me. It's you, boy—you, the man who's going to give the Blue Stockings another pennant. Pull off your cap—pull it off! Bow! Bow!"

For a moment there was a blur over Lefty's eyes. Through it he could dimly see the wildly tumultuous mass in the stands and on the bleachers. Mechanically he lifted his hand—his left hand—and touched his cap. And when he did so the great roar suddenly was intensified for an instant, although it had previously seemed that every person present was shouting as loudly as he could.

When Locke had reached the shelter of the covered bench, into which he dived for a few moments as one seeking to escape a deadly hail of bullets, he laughed again—queerly, incredulously.

"It can't be for me," he muttered. "Why, I'm —I'm only a cub yet—nothing but a busher."

Kennedy was at his side. "You'll show whether you're a busher or a Big League pitcher to-day,

Lefty," he said. "If you let this reception get your goat, then your name is Mud. But if you can go out there and pitch a winning game, nobody in fast company has got it on you."

"Give me two minutes," said Locke, gripping himself; "give me two minutes, and I'll show you."

"Good boy!" said old Jack. "Come out and warm up when you get ready."

He left Locke there, and went forth among his men, all of whom had greeted him on his return as rejoicing children might greet a beloved parent; and every one of whom had shaken the hand of Lefty Locke until Lefty's arm seemed ready to come off. Not even Pete Grist had held back. Far from it. Old Pete was among the first to strike palms with the southpaw.

"The prodigal son!" he cried. "The prodigal son back home! Welcome to our midst, Lefty. We're going to let you kill the fatted calf this afternoon—the Specters, you know."

"That's kind of you, Grist, old man," said Locke. "I've brought my little butcher knife with me, and I'm going to sink it to the hilt if I can."

As old Jack came out again from beneath the bench roof, here and there friends in the crowd shouted at him, but now he seemed deaf to all this as he went at work amid his men, directing them

as of old, keeping them on the jump, filling them with inspiration and confidence.

"Hey, Jack! You're the old man to do it!"

"Kennedy, you can deliver the goods! You did it once, and you will again."

"Welcome to our city, Mr. Kennedy! We have missed you."

"Oh, say, Jack, old boy, you look good to me!"

But these cries were faint compared with the renewed chorus of shouts which arose when Lefty Locke, flushed, yet steady and self-possessed, again stepped forth into view.

"Oh, you Lefty! Oh, you southpaw!"

"You're the kiddo! You're the Specter slayer!"

"How's your wing, Lefty?"

"Got your batting eye with you?"

"Lefty, don't you dare ever leave us again. You're home with your own family now."

Kennedy, glancing sidewise at Locke, to notice the effect of this revived demonstration, was well satisfied. Not by a flicker did the southpaw betray the emotion of satisfaction with which his heart must have been filled. He was steady as Gibraltar, and cool as polar ice.

CHAPTER XLV

THE GIRLS IN THE BOX

STILL with a view to the dramatic, Stillman had planned something else. It was with the greatest difficulty that he had succeeded in keeping Lefty Locke and Janet Harting apart, for Janet was in the city, the guest of Virginia Collier. And when Lefty reappeared on that field and received that marvelous ovation, Janet sat in the owner's box with Virginia, her gloved hands clasped with a fierceness that nearly burst the kid, her face by turns pale and flushed.

All the way across the diamond her eyes followed that splendid figure—the figure of the man she loved. The Niagaralike roaring of the crowd she was conscious of in a vague way, and it thrilled her; and it seemed that she must draw his gaze by her intense effort to do so. When he suddenly dove to the shelter of the bench, she relaxed, with a little sigh of disappointment.

Then for the first time she felt the arm of Virginia Collier about her. She heard Virginia's voice in her ear:

"Wasn't it splendid? Did you ever know anyone to get such an ovation?"

"Never," answered Janet, "but he didn't look—"

"He will look," assured Miss Collier. "Leave that to Jack Stillman."

"I owe a great deal to Mr. Stillman."

"So do I," said Virginia, glancing over her shoulder at Franklin Parlmee. "Only for Mr. Stillman, we might all be playing at cross-purposes now. There he is. He's speaking to Lefty."

Stillman had been pretty busy at his telegraph key, for he was one reporter who could do his own sending, and the events of the last few moments had caused him to sweat as he pounded out the Morse. He was athrill with the joy of it, like a stage manager who has planned a tremendous performance and seen it carried through successfully at the opening, and the crowd going wild over it.

"Lefty!" he called; and Locke, passing, turned at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Hello, Jack!" he returned.

"There's someone looking for you over in the manager's box," said Stillman.

As if he suddenly realized who it was, Locke whirled like a flash and started in that direction with long, swinging strides. His bronzed face

was flushed. Never had he looked handsomer than he did while Janet watched him drawing near.

"You—you, Janet!" he cried, heedless of everyone. "I tried to find you, but you were gone. I couldn't explain. Let me explain now."

"Hush, Phil!" she cautioned, pressing the gloved fingers of one hand to her lips, while, watched by thousands of eyes, she permitted him to hold the other hand. "You don't have to explain. Miss Collier has explained everything, and I wish to ask your pardon for—"

"Don't!" he entreated. "How could you know? It must have seemed beastly of me. I told you I was going to the theater with some fellows from the team, and you saw me there with—"

"Hasn't Janet told you that everything has been explained, Mr. Hazelton?" cut in Virginia Collier. "Of course, I didn't know about her, and just then I was somewhat peeved with Franklin. Oh, I think you've met Mr. Parlmee, haven't you?"

"Sure, we've met," said Parlmee, putting forth a hand, which finally led Lefty reluctantly to release the gloved fingers of Janet. "How are you, Locke, old chap? If I was a bit rude when we were introduced, perhaps you'll pardon me now, understanding the reason."

"Everybody seems eager to beg everybody's pardon," laughed Virginia Collier. "I wonder where father is? I know he was on hand to see you and Jack Kennedy when—"

"He was in the clubhouse," said Lefty. "I've seen him."

"Do you think you can win the game to-day?" asked Janet, apparently with a touch of anxiety.

"What do *you* think?" he questioned.

"I'm sure you can."

"Then I'll win it, Janet, if there's any pitching left in my old south wing."

"You'll have to pitch," said Parlmee. "They've been saving Donovan up for this game. They want it as bad as we do."

"Perhaps so," said Locke; "but we've got to have it."

Somehow, there was no touch of boasting in his manner, nor did there seem to be anything of the sort in his words. He was confident of himself, and his confidence had been redoubled by Janet's assurance that she knew he would win.

"When the game is over," said Miss Collier, "you'll find us waiting outside the clubhouse with the automobile. You'll join us, won't you?"

Only for a fraction of a minute did Lefty hesitate. "The others—the boys," he faltered. "If we win, they will—"

"They'll forgive you for deserting them this

time, I'm sure," she said quickly. "It only happens once in a lifetime, you know—and Janet will be there."

"So will I," he promised instantly.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE GAME OF HIS LIFE

NEVER in his life had Lefty Locke pitched such a game of baseball. Never had that great crowd seen such splendid work upon the mound. Again master of himself in every respect, thrilled with life and vigor from toes to finger tips, the amazing southpaw of the Blue Stockings fought every inch of the way as if life and honor depended upon it.

He knew *she* was watching him. He could feel her eyes upon him; yet they did not distract him from the task to which he had set his hand, his brain, his very soul. Instead, they were his inspiration, making him as unfathomable to those desperately waiting Specter batters as would have been Mathewson at his best.

In the whirl and thrill of the conflict, once or twice he thought of how a ball pitched by Donovan, his present opponent, glancing from his bat, had seemingly done him little damage, although it struck him squarely in the head; how that blow had presently brought about the entire loss of his own identity and the assumption of the name and,

in some respects, the identity of another man killed at his side in the railroad smash. Vaguely he could now remember fighting to recall the truth concerning himself, while his mind remained an absolute blank as to the past. And the agony of his struggles caused him to shudder.

But it was glorious to know that he was again restored to reason and to his normal condition. The shadow was gone from his mind—gone, he believed, never to return.

And all the other shadows had been dispelled in the meanwhile. Janet was yonder in the box, trusting him, believing in him, sorry she had ever doubted.

And so, while Jack Kennedy hugged himself on the bench, while Charles Collier gazed and marveled, while the great crowd cheered itself mad again and again, he cut the Specters down one after another as they faced him. Behind him his teammates waited, ready to give him their best support. Three times this great support prevented a Specter from getting a hit.

And Donovan, also pitching the game of his career, twice pulled himself out of bad holes, and kept the Blue Stockings from scoring. Once he wabbled and it seemed that he was gone, but his manager made no move, and in time he rose to the emergency and saved himself.

So the game continued, inning after inning,

with neither side getting a tally, with not a single Specter reaching first; for thus far Lefty was pitching a no-hit, no-run game. To-morrow the newspapers would be full of it, and the name of Tom Locke would be chiseled forever on the baseball tablet of fame.

No man present was happier than old Jack Kennedy, for he was the manager whose judgment had brought this young busher to the front and given him the opportunity through which in a single season he had risen higher than any bush-league pitcher ever rose before.

"He's my boy—my boy!" Kennedy whispered again and again as Lefty cut the Specters down with his burning speed, his bewildering change of pace, and his unhittable hook drop, delivered always when least expected. "I found him. I put him into the game after Brennan kicked him out. I thought I was done with baseball, but I'm back to die in harness, unless I'm fired again."

Without a single exception, Lefty's teammates were elated. Yes, it is true that even the veteran, old Pete Grist, was supremely happy as he watched Locke work. If for an instant a pang of jealousy entered his heart, he thrust it out as one would thrust forth the devil himself.

And Lefty's chums, Billy Orth, Laughing Larry, and Dirk Nelson, rejoiced unspeakably. All through the game Dalton laughed as of old,

while behind the pan Nelson crouched and signaled, sure that never once would Lefty fail to throw the curve called for and put it where he desired without the variation of an inch. Such control, such smoke, such headwork, Nelson had never before seen a pitcher display; and he afterward made the statement, regardless of the feelings of other twirlers who had worked with him.

From the opening of the game till the last man was down, the Specters strove like fiends to get Lefty's goat; but all their sneers, their tricks, and their baiting proved ineffectual. Apparently he was deaf, dumb, and blind to everything save the task in hand. The wild cheering of the tremendous crowd as he swept down batter after batter seemed to affect him no more than profound silence—perhaps not as much.

One, two, three, four, five innings—not a hit off Locke! Six, seven, eight innings—not a hit; not a man had reached first base!

"Shut 'em out!" pleaded the crowd. "Don't let 'em touch you to-day, Lefty! You've got 'em killed!"

Then in turn, when the Blue Stockings were at bat, that immense throng begged them to fall on Donovan and get a run.

"One run will do it!" yelled an urchin with a voice like a calliope. "Dat's all you want, fellers. It wins dis game."

One run! Donovan himself felt that it would be enough. Perspiration standing forth from every pore, his teeth set like the jaws of a vise, his eyes blazing, he whipped the ball across the corners. One run! Was he going to let this left-handed cub outpitch him in the struggle which would give the winning team the championship? Not if he ruined his arm then and there!

Then came the eighth inning, and again the strain of the terrible pace told on Donovan. The first man up got a safety, and the next hitter, directed by Kennedy, sacrificed him to second. With one down, it was Jack Daly's turn to bat, and Donovan laughed; for he had Jack's alley, and knew he could keep him from hitting.

But at this moment Kennedy suddenly came forth from the bench, bearing a bat. Kennedy, the old stager, the veteran, was going in as a pinch hitter.

Donovan laughed. "He's easier," he thought. "Why don't he send out Burchard?"

Burchard was the Blue Stockings' greatest batter, kept on the bench for just such emergencies as this; and a thousand others wondered that Kennedy should throw himself into the breach with big Burchard waiting and ready.

But Kennedy was inspired. He had been watching Donovan's work from the beginning of the game, and he believed he could find the man

for a safety. As he walked to the plate, he gave the runner a signal which told him to be on his toes and ready to go when the ball was hit.

Two balls Donovan pitched to Kennedy without finding the plate, and then he put one over. Old Jack let it pass, and heard a strike called. Donovan laughed at him, and Kennedy smiled back serenely.

"Give me another just like that, Jim," he invited. "I'll hit the next one."

"All right," returned the pitcher; "all right, Jack, old back number. Here you have it."

Kennedy knew Donovan was lying. He knew the man would pitch something entirely different, and perhaps wholly unexpected, but some inspiration told him just what it would be; and when Donovan put it across the inside corner, Kennedy fell back and met it on the trade-mark.

It was a line drive into left. The runner on second tore across third and stretched himself for the plate, while the fielder made a great throw to the pan to stop the score.

At the plate, Dillingham, the catcher, took that throw and jabbed the ball at the sliding runner, but nine men out of ten in the crowd saw that the prostrate man's foot was on the rubber when Dillingham tagged him, and the outspread hands of the umpire declaring him safe was the only manner in which the decision reached them; for it seemed

that thirty thousand maniacs filled the stands, the bleachers, and the outfield.

Donovan, shaking visibly, and pale as a sheet, braced himself hard while that uproar pounded upon his ears. The game was lost, and he knew it. Between them, Lefty Locke and old Jack Kennedy had won it.

It made little difference that, having apparently regained his control, Donovan grinned hard at Lefty when the latter came to bat, and told him he could not hit the ball. Calmly the young southpaw replied:

"I don't have to hit it, Jim; the damage is done."

It made no difference that Donovan struck Locke out. The Blue Stockings had scored, and when Lefty returned to the mound and the Specters faced him in the ninth, he mowed the last three down one after another, as if they were schoolboys.

At this moment it seemed that Lefty had triumphed over all obstacles and conquered every foe, but, with the approach of the coming season, he encountered a rival pitcher far more persistent and dangerous than Bert Elgin; a strange and unfathomable character who changed, almost in the flash of an eye, from open-hearted friendship to deadly and vindictive enmity, and as quickly and unexpectedly changed back again; a

person enshrouded in mystery, and seemingly the possessor of a dual nature that made him a veritable *Jekyll and Hyde.* The book in which this character, Nelson Savage, appears, is the fourth volume of the Big League Series, and it bears the title of "Lefty o' the Training Camp."

Had he attempted to reach the clubhouse by crossing the field, Lefty could not have escaped the clutches of the madly exultant crowd. They waited for him, but discreetly, with old Jack Kennedy at his side, he ducked into a runway and disappeared beneath the stand even while the great throng was still cheering, and shrieking his name.

"Well, some game to-day, kid, eh?" laughed old Jack, giving him a clap on the shoulder. "Some game, hey? I guess we're back in it."

"I guess we are," said Lefty. "If you don't mind, I'm going to dust away as soon as I can get a shower and change my clothes. There'll be someone waiting for me outside the gate."

"Go on, old man," returned the veteran manager. "I don't blame you a bit. She's a dream."

THE END

LEFTY O' THE TRAINING CAMP

A MOMENT LATER THE MANAGER WAS GRIPPING THE SOUTHPAW'S HAND AND ASKING THE INEVITABLE QUESTIONS.

(*Page 68 Frontispiece*

LEFTY
O' THE TRAINING CAMP

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of "Lefty o' the Bush," "Lefty o' the Big League," "Lefty o' the Blue Stockings."

ILLUSTRATED

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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Printed in the United States of America

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LEFTY O' THE TRAINING CAMP

CHAPTER I

THE GROUCH

"CROOKED? You never said a truer word in your life, Tethridge. Professional baseball's so rotten it's a wonder the board of health don't get after it."

The lean, slope-shouldered man sitting next to the window of the smoking car bent a puzzled glance on his more robust companion.

"Board o' 'ealth?" he echoed, his sandy eyebrows arching in an odd note of interrogation. "I don't tyke you, old chap. What 'ave the board o' 'ealth to do with biseball?"

The young man at his elbow frowned, and pushed back a long lock of dark hair straggling down from under the straight brim of an exaggeratedly flat derby.

"Nothing," he answered, in a resigned tone. "That was only my little joke, old man. In such

a bad state the board of health is needed. Get me?"

For a second or two the Englishman preserved that expression of stolid inquiry. Then, suddenly as cracks radiate over a sheet of heavy glass fractured by a stone, that long, solemn face broke into curving lines, and he laughed in a booming bass note quite out of keeping with the lean, narrow-chested figure. "Jolly good, old chap! My word! I 'ad no ideah you was such a bloomin' joker, Nelson."

He nudged his companion in the ribs. The latter, striving unsuccessfully to dismiss the expression of utter boredom from his tanned, rather rough-hewn face, pulled a package of cheap cigarettes from his pocket and offered them to the man by the window. Tethridge declined the cigarettes in favor of a blackened, disreputable-looking brier.

"The whole proposition's as crooked as the fighting game," declared the man called Nelson; "an' that's saying a whole lot, believe me! The crowd that runs it is out for the coin, an', take my word, they squeeze the public and rob their white slave players to get it."

He paused a second to send a swift sidelong glance at G. Munby Tethridge, who nodded instant agreement. In the seat just ahead a clean-cut, alert-looking man, with keen brown eyes and a

firm chin, moved his broad shoulders impatiently, and frowned at the magazine lying open on one knee.

"Gas bag!" he muttered under his breath.

"Look at the post season last year," pursued the maligner of organized baseball viciously. "Two-thirds or more o' the tickets handed over to speculators, an' anybody wantin' to see a game had to pay double or triple. Do you think them speculators didn't have to whack up with the management? Sure they did! It was a put-up job."

"What I always contended," agreed the Englishman, pulling hard on the odorous pipe. "A bally crooked gyme through an' through. Tyke a look at the w'y it's pl'yed. Anything goes, by Jove, so long as a man ain't caught. He'll swear himself black in the fice he wasn't put out when he was, or that he touched every bise when maybe he missed one; and the lies all go if the umpire didn't 'appen to see 'im. That's no gentleman's gyme, old chap, like cricket, or any other decent sport. There ain't any honor about it."

The harsh, penetrating voice, with its irritatingly positive intonation, was audible through the greater part of the half-empty smoker. The brown-eyed young man in front, having ceased making even a pretense at reading, was scowling out at the snow-covered landscape. His expression was one of deep indignation. A muscular

hand gripped the edge of the magazine with unconscious force. One foot beat lightly and impatiently on the rod beneath the seat in front of him.

"Huh!" grunted Nelson. "That ain't nothing. I could sit here by the hour, an' tell you a line o' stories that 'u'd make your hair curl. Here's jest one of 'em I calls to mind: A coupla seasons ago there was a fresh young piece o' cheese pitching with us that called himself Fred Moore. At that it wasn't no more his real name than it was mine. He was one o' these college dudes, playing on his college nine; an' then, come vacation, he beats it to some far-off bushes, where he pitches professional ball for the rest of the summer under a false monaker. There's honor for you, ain't it? That's the sort of thing as sickens me of the whole business, an' makes me swear to cut the game the minute I can root out something that'll bring me in enough coin to live on."

He hesitated, his scowling glance resting for a second on the broad shoulders of the man in front. At that moment a dark flush, rising from the immaculate collar, had just reached the edge of that heavy brown mane; but apparently Nelson was too moved by his own eloquence to observe this danger signal.

"It's them college muckers mostly who've put the profession where it is to-day," he went on

hotly. "They cheat to go through college, and afterward in baseball they'll do any crooked thing that'll help 'em to get ahead of some square, decent man. Look at what happened in the Panthers last year. They was both college dudes, you can bet!"

Mr. Tethridge arched his sandy brows in an expression of curiosity.

"W'at was that?" he inquired quickly. "I don't seem to remember what 'appened. Dessey it was after I left."

"It was." Nelson's rather full lips curled at the remembrance. "It was the last game of the season between the Panthers an' Bucks—a double header at that. Didn't make any difference who won. Panthers bound to stay tail-enders, you know. A guy named Benson, playin' third, wanted to boost his hittin' average for the season, so he makes up to Grant, pitchin' for the Bucks. They was both from the same college, and as sure I sit here, bo, every time that crook Benson comes to bat that other crook Grant lets him make a hit. He was up ten times in the two games, and you can guess what that did to his batting average. That's your college ball player all over. Do you wonder I hate the very sight of one?"

Tethridge shook his head slowly.

"Not I," he drawled. "Strynge what rotters education makes of men over hyer. But, I s'y, old

chap, 'ow is it nobody saw this an' myde a 'owl about it?''

In the barely perceptible pause before Nelson answered, the brown-haired man in the forward seat half turned his head with an impulsive movement, his lips parted as if he meant to speak. His face was flushed, his eyes sparkled with anger, but before he could get in a word the pessimistic ball player was speaking again.

''They did,'' he answered crisply. ''It was too much for even the machine to pull off. The crowd got suspicious, and the reporters took it up. Result was the management had to clear themselves by firing Grant; but, o' course, all he did was to change his name and get a job with another league.''

''Are you quite sure about that?''

The new voice, breaking in upon the conversation, was superficially quiet, almost drawling. There was a faint undercurrent of something quite different in it, however, which made Nelson hastily raise his head to stare in annoyed surprise at the man in the forward seat, who had turned round upon them.

''Huh?'' he grunted, noting in a flash the keen brown eyes and uncompromising chin of the stranger. '' 'Course I am. What do you know about it, anyhow?''

''I happen to know that both Benson and Grant

were blacklisted, and never got back into organized baseball,'' was the ready retort. ''Benson's pitching for a wildcat Texas team; Grant's on the Pacific coast. Moreover, you seem to have forgotten that the manager of the Bucks was also dropped by the president of the league, who did everything in his power to show that such scandals would not be tolerated for an instant.''

Nelson flushed angrily. ''*Is* that so?'' he inquired sarcastically. ''Reg'lar walking baseball guide, ain't you? I s'pose somebody was kidding you with this song and dance about Benson, an' you swallowed it hook, line, an' sinker. That's about your style.''

''Not quite,'' returned the stranger coolly. ''I happened to pitch against him last spring at Ashland, the Hornets' training camp, you know. He calls himself Pete Nevens now.''

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITH THE QUEER EYES

AT the stranger's matter-of-fact reference to a Big League organization which was almost at the top of the tree, Nelson's jaw sagged, and for a second he sat staring at the brown-haired young man in dazed incredulity.

"Is that so?" he sneered again, recovering himself. "On Jim Brennan's pitching staff, are you? What might be the name you sail under?"

"The same one I took with me to the Blue Stockings," was the sharp retort. "Tom Locke."

For a moment there was silence as the two men stared intently at each other. Though he betrayed nothing of what he felt, Lefty was almost startled at this first real glimpse of the stranger's eyes. A moment before he would have called them black, but now they had lightened strangely, as if behind the iris glowed a baleful, almost uncanny fire. There was something so weirdly fascinating in the transformation that the Big League pitcher was unconscious of everything else until Nelson broke the silence.

"Lefty Locke!" he exclaimed triumphantly at

last. "So you're that bird, are you?" He turned promptly to the Englishman, who sat gaping and bewildered. "Tethridge, old man," he said, "let me make you acquainted with a fine specimen of what we was just talking about—one o' them college dudes who makes his living—an' a mighty good one, at that—off'n professional baseball, but who's too ashamed of it to play under his own name."

Lefty's eyes narrowed slightly. "My reasons for not playing under my own name are certainly no affair of yours," he said. "At least, I don't go around blackguarding my profession and every one connected with it."

"Did I say a single thing that wasn't true?" demanded Nelson hotly.

"Only about three-quarters of your remarks, that's all," returned Lefty. "It's the same old bunk you hear every now and then from the fan with a grouch. Because organized baseball is conducted on a big scale and with some outside betting upon it, it's crooked. I couldn't help hearing all you said, and just about every statement you made was—"

"Gospel, an' nothing else," broke in Nelson angrily. "That ticket business in the post season a year ago was so raw it had every newspaper in the country hollering—you can't deny that."

"I don't deny that the ticket sale was badly

managed," returned Locke. "You noticed probably—since you're so observing—that the speculators didn't have a show last October."

"Mebbe not," snapped Nelson; "but what did happen? The whole thing was cut and dried from the very start. The public was worked to the limit. Whenever there was a chance of the Cubs cinching the pennant before the full seven games had been played, and the limit of gate receipts raked in, then one of their boys would throw a game just to—"

"Ridiculous!" broke in Lefty. He was on his feet now, leaning lightly against the back of the seat ahead of him, with both hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets. Though seemingly quite cool and indifferent, there was a dangerous glitter in his brown eyes, and he was apparently oblivious to the half-dozen other passengers, who had left their seats and moved closer, attracted by the argument.

"Ridiculous!" he repeated emphatically. "You're talking drivel. How could such a thing be done? How could a world-series game possibly be thrown? With two such organizations as the ones fighting it out last fall, what you claim is an absolute impossibility. You, as a ball player, ought to know it as well as I."

Nelson glared in a cold fury. "The Trojans hit Woodby all over the lot in that fifth game—

which never happened before or since," he growled angrily. "If that wasn't done a-purpose to throw the game—"

"Shucks!" derided Lefty. "Do you think he was deliberately throwing away over a thousand dollars bonus? Do you think he wanted the distinction of losing the world's championship for his club? The whole match was fair and square from beginning to end, and organized baseball is as clean and decent a sport as there is."

"Ah, cut it!" broke in Nelson roughly. His big, muscular hands were tightly clenched; his strange eyes glared balefully; his face expressed eloquently the rage he felt for this cool, confident young man who held such an enviable position in major baseball, and who was quietly disproving every one of the busher's contentions with an ease and finality which was maddening. "You're a great piece o' cheese, ain't you, butting into a private conversation where you ain't wanted! S'pose you take the bench and try how it 'u'd feel to mind your own business for a spell!"

Lefty straightened up. His face was somewhat flushed, for there was just enough truth in Nelson's remark to strike home. "If you want to keep a conversation private it's a good idea to refrain from the brand of stuff you've been reeling off by the yard in a voice that everybody in the car could hear. You're the sort of cri ic

who hunts out the worst possible example he can find and judges a whole big class by that exception. I've heard a few soreheads in the grandstand who talked like you, but I certainly never expected to run against a player—even from the bushes—who blackguarded his profession as you do, and tried to make the sort of stuff you've been handing out pass as the truth."

Nelson leaped to his feet with an imprecation. "You paper-collar dude!" he snarled. "Mebbe you think you can call me a liar and get away with it, but I'll show you!"

He lunged suddenly across the back of the seat, the whole weight of his body behind his hard fist. If the blow had landed on Lefty's chin, as was intended, the altercation would have ended instantly. It happened, however, that Locke moved just at the right moment. Whether it was by accident or design the scattering spectators could not determine. They only knew that Nelson's fist shot harmlessly over the pitcher's shoulder, and the next moment they beheld Lefty standing quietly in the aisle, facing his antagonist.

"You quitter!" cried the latter, leaping out from between the seats. "You needn't think you're going to get away. I'll—"

"Cut that out, young feller!" sounded unexpectedly in a voice of authority. "No scrapping allowed on this train."

A hand gripped Nelson's shoulder with no gentle touch. Still sputtering, the busher twisted around, to behold the stalwart conductor, who was accompanied by a square-shouldered brakeman.

"Cut it, I tell you!" repeated the official sharply, observing the look of indecision on Nelson's face. "This kind of thing don't go here. Get me?"

Evidently the aggressor did. For a second or two he stood glaring darkly at the conductor from those uncanny, evil-looking eyes. Then, with an angry growl, he shook himself free, and stepped back beside Tethridge.

"Wait!" he growled, his angry glance shifting to where Locke stood quietly in the aisle. "I'll get you yet, an' get you good, when there ain't anybody to hide behind."

Lefty made no answer. The threat did not disturb him greatly. His lips curved a little at the corners, and there was a whimsical flicker of amusement in the eyes which rested inquiringly on the conductor's face.

"If you've finished your cigar, Mr. Locke," suggested that official, in a very different tone from the one he had been using, "would you mind going back to the Pullman? This drunk seems to have it in for you bad, and if—"

"I ain't drunk!" exclaimed the indignant Nelson. "I'm aiming to get square with that gink for calling me a liar, an' I will if—"

The conductor waited to hear no more. Though quite able to preserve peace in an emergency, he never lost a chance to use softer measures when they availed. In the present instance, the removal of the famous pitcher to another car would apparently accomplish his purpose, so he lost no time in bringing that about. With a friendly hand on Locke's arm, and keeping up a flow of pleasant conversation, he made his way down the aisle.

Lefty accompanied him without protest. He disliked anything in the nature of a public rumpus, and was glad to bring the distasteful encounter to an end. At the same time he could not shut his ears to the stream of loud-mouthed taunts which followed him down the car. They brought a touch of color to his cheeks. It was not altogether easy to preserve that attitude of unconsciousness, but he managed it.

CHAPTER III

A MANAGER'S DILEMMA

BACK in his Pullman chair, Lefty tried to forget the unpleasant encounter in the smoker. He realized that there was no one but himself to blame for what had happened, and he regretted the impulsiveness which had made it possible for the disagreeable stranger to drag him into an altercation. Of course, they were never likely to run into each other again, Lefty reflected, yet he did not find that possibility one of unqualified satisfaction. Strangely enough, for one who so disliked brawls and public rows, he discovered himself wishing for a chance to take a little of the bumptiousness out of the man who found so much satisfaction in maligning his own profession.

At length, however, he managed by a determined effort to thrust the matter from his mind and turn his attention to more important things. Kennedy, the lately reinstated manager of the famous Blue Stockings, had wired him to take the first train to Deering, where old Jack spent the few months of the "off season" on the farm.

No reason had been given for this sudden summons to travel over a thousand miles, but Locke had been expecting the message for some time, and was not surprised. It is far from usual for a manager to talk over details of the club personnel and formation with his star pitcher. In the present case the two happened to have been thrown together on more than ordinarily intimate terms in the bush the previous summer, and Kennedy came to know the young Princeton man as few save his closest friends knew him. He came also to have a decided appreciation of Locke's judgment and ability at sizing up a ball player, and after their return to the Blue Stockings late in the season the informal chats inaugurated in the Middle Western town continued at frequent intervals.

"He's getting worried about the make-up of the team," Lefty decided, propping his chin on one hand and staring out over the flat, snow-covered landscape, "and wants to talk it over. I'm not surprised. There'll have to be several holes plugged before we can think of starting after that pennant in April."

The manager of a Big League team is never free from worry and responsibility. The moment the last game of the season is over he begins casting about for material to fill gaps and strengthen the team for the grilling struggle of another sea-

son. The opening of that season is six months away, to be sure, but frequently that time is all too short for what has to be done. The mere fact of not hearing from Kennedy had comforted Locke with the belief that everything was going well. Now, however, it looked as if the manager's schemes were not working out quite as he had planned them.

"Wonder where he's fallen down?" mused Lefty. "There's third and center—and more twirlers. I wonder just which particular item is troubling him the most?"

He continued to ponder the question until the porter, with his inevitable whiskbroom, approached to perform the parting rites and pocket the parting quarter. Shortly afterward Lefty swung off the train at the small station of Deering, made straight for the only waiting "cutter," and was presently gliding swiftly over the hard-packed, snowy road, listening to all the latest neighborhood gossip the driver had to retail.

It was good to see again the square, old-fashioned white house, with its wide veranda and the hospitable chimneys, hinting of cheery, crackling open fires; and even better to meet in the hall that lean, lanky, awkward figure with the homely, kindly face and the inimitable smile.

Kennedy was unfeignedly glad to see him, and when the first brief greetings were over he lost

no time in conducting Lefty into his special sanctum and drawing up two chairs before the smoldering logs.

"Spider's sick," he announced laconically, thrusting one hand through his iron-gray mop of hair, which already stood up like the crest of a cockatoo.

"What!" gasped Lefty, in the utmost consternation. "Spider Grant?"

It was an idle question. Among the Blue Stockings there was only one "Spider," that name being the sole property of the peerless first baseman and captain of the team. But in his dismay at this thunderbolt Lefty was not thinking of what he said. The query burst from his lips quite without conscious volition.

"Uh-huh," affirmed the manager; "inflammatory rheumatism. Tough, ain't it?"

"It surely is," agreed Locke fervently. "By Jove, that's the limit! How long has he had it?"

"Couple of weeks. Didn't tell me at first, 'cause he didn't want to worry me. He's mighty consid'rit, Spider is." The kindly smile flickered for an instant out of the network of worried lines, only to vanish quickly again. "But I'd a lot rather have known it before, an' had that much more time."

Lefty nodded understandingly. Unconsciously his face reflected the expression of the older man,

but with the difference that a faint, lightening gleam of hope brought to his eyes.

"Look here, Jack," he said impulsively, "it can't be so bad. Surely there's a chance of his getting over it. He's not old, and he's never had it before that I've heard. Perhaps by the time training season starts—"

"Nix!" put in Kennedy decisively. "I'm taking no chances. He did have it before, two years ago, an' never told no one. Got wet hunting, same as he did this time. No, they never come back—leastwise, not once in a thousand times—an' I'm not gambling with them kind of odds. It's up to me to dig up a new first baseman, and do it in jig time, at that. You know I keep two scouts, Carney and Sackett, working the year round; but every other manager has a bunch of 'em on the rustle, and this digging up of new material is getting more and more difficult ev'ry year. So I'm up against it, and it's close onto the first of February."

A wry, crooked smile flickered on his lips for an instant, then vanished.

"But that's not what I wanted you specially for," he went on rapidly, "though of course I want your opinion of my list of eligibles. You've sized up the situation, I reckon. You know why we were licked in the post-season series."

Lefty did not answer at once. He had dropped

both elbows on his knees, and, with chin resting in cupped hands, was staring thoughtfully at the fire.

"Well," he said slowly at last, "Jack Daly didn't seem to be covering third the way he used to; slow in arching 'em over the diamond, you know. There's no doubt, too, that old Brock is losing his batting eye, or something. He hit under two-eighty last season."

"Exactly. Anything else?"

"You could do with—another twirler on the list."

"I sure could!" Kennedy's tone was emphatic. He bent forward suddenly, his face serious, and emphasized his remarks with upraised finger. "Lefty, this finding the right sort of men for the pitching staff has got me guessing some. Carney found a sweet hitter for center field, an' I reckon we can fill Daly's place somehow; but this other thing—whew! When I came back last fall there wasn't but two first-class twirlers in the crowd—you an' Pete Grist. The others was all right in lots of ways, but you couldn't depend on 'em. That's the main reason we lost the world's series—I didn't have enough men I was sure of to put on the mound. Now, Pete's an old-timer who can't last forever; you see where that puts us. We've simply got to find at least two new pitchers I can rely on, or else drop into second division."

"That's right," Lefty agreed. "Two's the least you could get along with. How've you made out so far?"

Kennedy shook his head slowly. "Nothing to boast of. Got rafts of twirlers, you understand, but they're mostly from the bush, which isn't what I wanted at all. I offered all kinds of money for Donovan, of the Specters, and Hen Wolfer, but nothing doing; they won't loosen up on 'em. My best bet so far is Sackett's find, a lad named Savage who was doing things all last season out West."

"Great spitball artist, isn't he?" inquired Lefty. "I seem to remember reading about him."

"He's got something besides a spitball," Kennedy returned grimly, "or I'd never have looked at him. I never could see a spitter if a man could sneak the ball over any other way. I've watched this boy work several times, and I'm pretty sure we can make something out of him. If I could only find another as promising, believe me, I'd feel easier in my mind."

CHAPTER IV

THE UNEXPECTED

"THAT'S not as easy as it sounds, considering that your scouts have raked the field with a fine-tooth comb," Lefty said slowly as Kennedy awaited his answer. "Have you thought of Liddell, of Minneapolis?"

"Yes, but they've had a man drafted from 'em already. It's the same with McGargle, of St. Paul, and Jerry Knight, of the Internationals."

"How about— By Jove! There is a lad who might make good, Jack! He pitched all last season on the Sharks, of the Seaboard League. I saw one of the early games, and he was certainly there with the goods. He kept it up, too, for I got interested in the boy and followed his record. Name's Temple—Gene Temple—and—"

"Oh, shucks!" interrupted Kennedy, in a disappointed tone. "I know him. He's nothing but a kid, Lefty. Only out of school a year or so. Bushers need ripening, son. You're one big exception, of course, but I couldn't expect that luck again in a hundred years. I've got all the raw

material I want—and more, too. What I'm after now is something sure."

"I've an idea you'd find this boy worth trying," was the composed reply; "and you can't exactly call a Class A League the bushes. Wait till I tell you a few things."

Without waiting for the manager's acquiescence, he proceeded to draw from his exceptional memory facts and figures concerning the brief career of this youth from a small Eastern college who had so aroused his interest. Kennedy was bored at first, but soon became attentive.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Mebbe, as you say, he's worth trying. We can draft a man from that club, too. Hanged if I won't do it—or, better yet, I'll let you put through the deal. I'll have my hands full locating a first baseman, and there isn't any time to be lost."

Now that his mind was made up, the manager wasted not a minute in arranging the necessary details. Lefty happened to remember that Temple came from one of the small Jersey towns not far from New York, and it was natural to suppose that he would spend the winter at home. They decided, therefore, that Locke should take the eastbound train which passed through Deering in little more than an hour, and so save a good twelve hours.

Word was sent out to the stableman to hitch up

and have the cutter around in half an hour, and the brief interval of waiting was well occupied by a discussion of every possible candidate for the vacant position at first. Lefty made a number of suggestions, and old Jack had become really cheerful when the sound of sleigh bells brought them out of their chairs.

"Mighty glad we've had this talk, Lefty," said Kennedy, with a friendly hand on Locke's shoulder. "I feel better already. Nail this wonder of yours. Best thing you can do is to bring him South with you. Training for the cubs will start in about ten days, and I reckon you won't mind coming that early, will you?"

"Not a bit, if I can help any," said Lefty, sliding into his heavy overcoat. "Don't come outside. It's cold after sitting in front of that fire. Good-by."

He held out a hand, and Kennedy gripped it.

"So long!" cried the manager. "Remember, this Temple wonder is your find, and if he falls down you can expect to be just about scalped by your Uncle Dudley."

"I'll have to see that he makes good, then," returned Lefty.

A moment later the door had closed behind him. He paused a second to pull up the collar of his ulster, for it had begun to snow. A man was coming up the veranda steps, his figure bulking

indistinctly through the flying flakes. Lefty wondered idly whether he could be the one who was to drive him to the station, and, if so, why he had left the cutter. The fellow stopped before him, and, with a quick intake of astonishment, the Big League pitcher recognized the unpleasant, evil eyes and rough-hewn features of the disgruntled busher he had encountered on the train.

The recognition was mutual. Uttering an exclamation of triumph, Nelson stepped swiftly forward, his fists clenched.

"So it's you, is it?" he cried. "This is luck! You slipped away from me before, but there ain't nobody here to hide behind. Put up your hands! Ain't you got any nerve at all?"

So amazed was Lefty at the appearance of the fellow there, of all places, that for a second or two he stood perfectly still, staring at him.

"Say, have I got to lam you into showin' a little fight?" fumed Nelson, shaking a fist in Locke's face. "If you don't—"

He stopped abruptly as the door was jerked suddenly open to reveal the spare figure of the Blue Stockings' manager standing on the threshold, his glance flashing from one to the other of the two men.

"Well," old Jack inquired curtly, "what's all this about, Savage? What do you mean holding up Locke on his way to make a train?"

The busher's blustering manner vanished with ludicrous swiftness before the stern glare of Jack Kennedy. He dropped his lids, and, shuffling his feet awkwardly, began a mumbled, halting explanation.

Of this Lefty heard scarcely a word. He was staring dazedly at the flushed, sullen face of the embarrassed minor leaguer. What under the sun did Jack mean by calling him Savage? He couldn't be the new pitcher of whom Kennedy had just been boasting. Distinctly Locke had heard the Englishman on the train call him Nelson—not once, but several times.

"Well, beat it into the house, and I'll talk to you directly," came in the manager's sharp, incisive voice. "Now, Lefty," he went on, when the fellow had vanished, "what the deuce is up? You didn't tell me you knew him."

Locke shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't until a few hours ago. I ran into him on the train, and got mixed up in a little altercation. Did I hear you call him Savage, Jack, or was I mistaken?"

"Sure, he's Savage," Kennedy answered. "Nelson Savage is the new twirler I was telling you about. What you got against him, anyhow?"

Lefty's lips parted, and then closed swiftly. "Oh, nothing," he answered, turning abruptly away. "I was surprised, that's all. Thought his

name was Nelson. Time to get going, Jack. Good-by."

He ran down the steps, and climbed quickly into the cutter waiting there. Once out on the high-road, headed for the village, the driver resumed his gossipy chat, but discovered his companion oddly reticent.

The truth was that Lefty found it impossible to keep his mind off Kennedy's new pitcher, and the more he thought about the fellow the greater became his disapproval. Personally he was not in the least troubled by the discovery that this Savage was destined to become a rival. He could hold his own both on the diamond and off. But dissension and ill feeling always play havoc with a ball team, and here were both with a vengeance. Besides, Lefty's opinion of the newcomer was distinctly unfavorable. A man such as Savage had shown himself to be was not at all the caliber of which first-rate Big League players are made.

"I certainly hope Jack didn't pick a lemon," the twirler said to himself, with a troubled frown; "but I'll be hanged if it don't look that way."

CHAPTER V

THE FACE IN THE MIRROR

ANXIETY continued to be present in Lefty's mind at frequent intervals during the trip East. It made him begin even to doubt his own judgment, and wonder if, after all, he had been wise in recommending a pitcher of whom he really knew nothing personally. It was quite possible that Gene Temple might turn out to be as undesirable as Savage, in spite of the record he had made on the diamond the previous season. All this was not exactly pleasant to contemplate, especially when Lefty recalled the manner in which he had really persuaded Jack Kennedy, against the latter's judgment and inclination, to consent to the trial.

The fact that the Sharks' manager was away and did not return until the second day after Locke's arrival in New York was not calculated to relieve Lefty's worry. When at length he did see Mr. Amos Jillson, however, the latter's demeanor was reassuring. After a momentary flash of annoyance, he began to blackguard Temple strenuously. The fellow was wild, undependable,

even tricky, he said. He'd been thinking, in fact, of sending him back to the bushes again. It was a sure thing that a man of his caliber wouldn't last a week in such an organization as the Blue Stockings.

Knowing the subterfuges of the trade, Lefty listened to it all with bland composure, quite unmoved. When the manager realized what he was up against, he became curt, almost pettish, and went through the formalities of transference with the greatest possible dispatch.

Temple resided with his parents in the neighboring village of Belle View, so Lefty was briefly informed. He had never heard of this rising suburb, and when he tried to reach it by means of a very circuitous trolley line, he hoped fervently that he might never have occasion to seek it again.

It had been dark for over an hour when he finally alighted from the car, stiff, cold, and decidedly hungry. Had he entertained the least conception of the time required to make the journey, it would certainly have been put off until the next day. But once he had found Temple, the interview was not likely to take long. Then he could get a bite to eat and find some way of returning more directly to New York and civilization.

The fairly well-lighted main street of Belle View was lined with small shops in trim new buildings.

Most of them were closed, but the brilliant windows of one attracted Lefty's eye. He had almost reached the door, perceiving with approval that it was a clean, neat-looking little restaurant, when the sight of a railroad track flanked by an exceedingly up-to-date station of stucco made him give a deep sigh of thankfulness.

Within five minutes he had learned from the ticket seller everything he wished to know. New York, by underground, was exactly twenty-eight minutes away. There was a train at seven-forty-three, and another at nine-forty-five. It was now a few minutes before seven. Eight minutes' brisk walking would bring him to the Temple house.

It did not take Lefty long to make up his mind. If he stopped to get something to eat first, he would miss the earlier train, and be in for a tiresome wait of more than two hours. By hunting up Temple at once, dinner would be delayed not more than half or three-quarters of an hour longer, and he could have it in quiet comfort at his own hotel. With a word of thanks to the communicative agent, the pitcher hastily left the station, and walked briskly up the street.

Three blocks straight ahead, the man had said, two blocks to the left, then turn to the right, and take the house on the next right-hand corner. Lefty found the blocks inordinately long, as country blocks are likely to be, but there was no

difficulty whatever in following the agent's directions to the letter.

"Some class to this town!" the ball player reflected as he turned the last corner, on which stood an attractive concrete bungalow. "Next right-hand corner, he said. That would be it at the end of the block."

There were only three houses in the entire block, which was shorter than the others he had traversed. The concrete bungalow occupied the first corner; then came a low, rambling house set back from the street, and gleaming hospitably with lights. A long stretch of vacant property followed before the neat hedge and well-kept grounds of the Temple place were reached.

This house also stood well back from the street, and Lefty was halfway up the walk before he noticed how dark and gloomy it seemed. A clump of evergreens shielded it from the street light. Not a solitary gleam showed in any one of the many windows. Either the place was equipped with peculiarly opaque shutters or there were no lights inside the house to show.

"I hope the whole family isn't out," grumbled Lefty, as he ran up the veranda steps.

The doorway was a colonial one, with long, narrow, diamond-paned windows on each side. Before ringing, Locke paused to peer through one of these. It was not drawn shades or closed shutters

which gave that air of gloominess to the place. There were no lights in the hall or anywhere else in the front of the house that he could see. There was a momentary pause before Lefty's hand reached toward the bell. He would at least make absolutely certain that there was no one at home before leaving the place. There might be a servant somewhere about, or possibly—

He caught his breath sharply. The fingers feeling for the electric button stiffened. From the farther end of the hall a glare of light suddenly flashed up in a startling, wholly inexplicable manner which was bewildering. For a minute or two Lefty stood there, staring dazedly, before his lips curved in a grin of understanding.

The light was not in the hall at all. It shone through a door in the right-hand wall, full upon a high, massive mirror standing in the opposite corner. All in a flash Lefty took in the heavy, gilded frame and the low, old-fashioned marble-topped stand on which it rested. Then his eyes widened at what he saw reflected in the glass.

Only a very limited portion of the room was visible. A bit of green wall, with part of a wide black picture frame, showed distinctly, while in the foreground, bending over a table, the figure of a man in a check suit interested Lefty amazingly. There was something puzzlingly familiar about those square, muscular shoulders, the set of the

head, the very sleekness of the crisp black hair. The fellow could not be Temple, who was a pronounced blond; yet the Blue Stocking pitcher was possessed with the certainty of having seen the man before.

A moment later the stranger, straightening up, turned toward the door, and Locke gasped as he recognized the face of Nelson Savage.

CHAPTER VI

SUSPICIOUS DENIALS

LEFTY'S first thought was that he had been deceived by a superficial resemblance, coupled with the tricks played by a faulty mirror. But swiftly that explanation vanished. For a full minute the man stood quite still against the table, staring thoughtfully out into the darkened hall. The lights from above shone full on his face, bringing out even in the reflection every little detail of form and coloring. Hair, eyes, features—all were identical. It was Jack Kennedy's newest recruit without the possibility of a doubt. As he realized this Locke's eyes narrowed, and the muscles of his jaw hardened.

It was puzzling enough, after having left Savage on Jack's farm, a thousand miles away, to come upon him three days later in this New Jersey suburb; but to find him on apparently friendly terms with Gene Temple was even more surprising, and a great deal more unpleasant. He had not supposed the two to be even casually acquainted. They came from opposite extremes of

the continent, and had never, so far as Locke was aware, even played in the same game.

Recovering quickly from his surprise, Lefty followed the actions of the bush pitcher with the closest attention. There was no questioning the air of being at home which was betrayed in his every action. After that momentary pause under the light, he squared his shoulders decisively, and walked out into the hall, returning in a moment with something in his hand. Just what it was Lefty could not see, for the fellow stepped out of range at once. During the next five minutes or so the glass reflected only tantalizing glimpses of him moving about the room.

What he was doing the watcher could not determine, nor was he inordinately curious. His mind was taken up to a much greater extent in wondering whether Gene Temple was also in the house. So far, nothing had been seen of the Seaboard pitcher, yet it was hard to believe that Savage was here alone.

Suddenly Locke's hand reached for the bell, but he paused, his finger tips just touching the button. His impulse had been to ring and see what would happen, but he repressed it. If Temple was there he would doubtless come to the door, and Lefty was not so sure he cared about talking with the fellow just now. He wanted time to digest his discovery, to readjust his mind to the realization

that Temple was apparently on intimate terms with an individual for whom Lefty hadn't the slightest use. It might make a radical difference in his actions. One recruit of Savage's caliber was quite enough in the training camp, Locke reflected. Under the circumstances, he might decide that he had no use for Gene Temple, after all.

So, instead of ringing, Lefty went quietly down the steps and along the flagged walk to the street. Instinctively he retraced his steps to Main Street, moved, perhaps, by a subconscious picture of the clean little restaurant on the corner. But all the while his mind was going over and over the problem which had so suddenly confronted him, and he was trying his best to decide what he ought to do. It seemed unjust to condemn a man unheard, yet if Temple was not a friend of Savage how else was it possible to account for what Locke had just seen?

Brief as had been their acquaintance, Lefty's dislike and disapproval of the Western busher was acute, and by the time he reached the main street he had decided to have nothing to do with any of the fellow's friends. He had also decided that the sooner everything was straightened out and settled the better. He wished now he had obeyed that first impulse to rouse Temple at the house.

"There'll be no trotting back to New York until

I've located the fellow and straightened things out," the pitcher said as he opened the restaurant door and stepped into the warm, brightly lighted interior.

As he closed the door and turned to one of the bare-topped, shiny tables that ran along one side of the room, he heard an exclamation of surprise from a tall young man in a heavy ulster who was just turning away from the cigar stand:

"Jumping Jemimah! Why, it's Lefty Locke!"

Since the triumphant finish of the past season, Lefty had received about as much adulation as any professional in the Big League. Wherever he went enthusiastic fans treated him with that mixture of deference and friendliness which is so characteristic of fans the country over. Lefty made no pretense of being bored. He looked upon it all as part of the game, and felt that some slight occasional inconvenience was little enough to pay for the fame which had come to him. It amused him to have people recognize him in street cars and public places. Even the inevitable string of small boys, with awe-struck faces, camping on his trail, did not annoy him. In the field he rather liked to hear the bleacherites roar out that "Oh, you Lefty!" in tones of fond proprietorship. He felt that the greater part of it was genuine; that people really did like him, and were proud of him. And to treat such honest admiration with indiffer-

ence or disdain would be churlish, ill bred, impossible.

As he turned now, with a faint, friendly smile for the man who had spoken so impulsively, he saw a tall, well-built fellow, with laughing gray eyes set in a face which was almost too good looking. It was a face which, once seen, was not likely to be forgotten, and, after that first brief flash of surprise, Lefty's smile deepened to one of pleased satisfaction.

"How are you, Temple?" he said quietly, putting out his hand.

"Fine as silk!" was the reply before an expression of dazed bewilderment leaped into the gray eyes. "But how the deuce— Say, you're Lefty Locke, of the Blue Stockings, aren't you?"

"Sure thing!"

"But I don't understand how you know my name. I'm sure I never met you before, though I've seen you in the box, of course."

His voice was low and pleasant; his gaze frank, direct, and steady. As the Big League pitcher slipped out of his coat and hung it up, he found himself warming already to the stranger.

"It doesn't seem to occur to you that I might also have seen *you* pitch," he suggested.

Temple laughed. "You might, but that's different; I'm next door to the bushes."

Locke shrugged his shoulders, and moved

toward one of the tables. The room was almost empty, a man and woman at the rear being the only other patrons. A single waitress hovered at a little distance, waiting for the latest patron to settle himself.

"I happened to see you pitch a game early last spring," Lefty explained, "and I don't often forget a face."

He paused, one hand on the back of a chair, his eyes fixed intently on Temple's. He had suddenly made up his mind to settle the whole affair without delay.

"I'm going to ask you a question which may strike you as rather peculiar," he resumed abruptly. "How long have you known Nelson Savage?"

The younger pitcher suddenly stubbed his toe against a rubber mat, and dropped the lighted cigar he was carrying. He bent instinctively to pick it up; then, changing his mind, set his heel on the glowing end, and took a fresh one from his pocket.

"Nelson Savage?" he repeated blankly. "I'm afraid I don't get you, quite. Who is he?"

Locke's face hardened perceptibly. He had not expected such a barefaced denial. He hesitated an instant, still holding Temple's gaze in thrall. It seemed remarkable that the gray eyes never wavered or shifted.

"It's rather odd that you should ask that," he remarked coldly, "when he's making himself at home at this very moment in your house."

Temple's jaw sagged; the match he had just struck slipped unheeded through his fingers.

"You're—kidding me—aren't you?" he stammered.

Lefty made a negative motion of his head, and, pulling out the chair, sat down. "I have just come from there," he returned. "I saw him."

Still with that dazed expression on his face, Temple came close to the table, and, bending over, gripped the edge of it with both hands. The action crumpled his cigar into fragments, but apparently he was unconscious of it. He was staring at the older man with a look of bewilderment which could scarcely have been counterfeited. When finally he broke the silence his words came in jerks.

"You say—there's a man—named Savage in my house—now—this minute?" he gasped. "You saw him—there?"

A gleam of fresh interest flashed into Lefty's eyes; the hard line of his compressed lips softened. Either this man was genuinely surprised and disturbed or else he was an amazing actor.

"I certainly did," the Blue Stocking pitcher returned, in a less chilly tone; "not more than fifteen or twenty minutes ago."

Temple straightened abruptly, with a decisive squaring of his shoulders. He began to button his ulster.

"Then he's there for no good purpose," he said. "I know of no one who has any business there. My people are away—visiting in Boston. The house is closed—unoccupied, except when I go there to sleep. Whoever this man Savage is, it looks to me as if he'd broken in to steal, and if he has—good night!"

He swung abruptly away from the table, and strode toward the door. Lefty stared after him for a second; then, springing up, he grabbed coat and hat, and followed.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLUNDER

WHAT little conversation passed between the two men as they hurried toward the Temple house was spasmodic and choppy. Briefly Lefty explained how he had come to see Savage. The younger man asked no questions, and was apparently not even curious to know what Locke could want with him. He seemed, in fact, to be answering mechanically, as if his brain was all the time occupied with some other phase of the situation; and, naturally, the Blue Stockings' pitcher quickly relapsed into silence.

He himself was in a condition of puzzled doubt and uncertainty which gave him plenty to think about. Much as he disliked Nelson Savage, he did not wish to believe that the man would deliberately break into a house for the purpose of stealing. Not only would it be an act of incredible folly, but the coincidence of his traveling a thousand miles to rob the home of Gene Temple was too startling to credit.

Yet, if that were not the true explanation, Tem-

ple himself must be an unmitigated liar, his every action deliberately intended to deceive. Lefty found this quite as hard to believe, and he decided to reserve judgment until he had a little more to work on.

"In five minutes I'll know," he said to himself as they hastened around the corner by the concrete bungalow. "It's one of the queerest things—Say, Temple, where are you going?"

The last sentence was uttered aloud in a surprised tone, for the blond young man had turned abruptly in at the bungalow gate, and was striding up the walk. At the sound of Locke's voice he slowed down a bit and glanced over his shoulder.

"Going!" he echoed guardedly. "I'm hustling to pinch this housebreaker before he makes a getaway."

Locke caught his breath sharply. "You don't mean to say you live *here?*"

"I sure do!" Temple's tone was puzzled. "Where'd you think I lived?"

A wave of crimson surged over Lefty's face at the realization of the blunder he had made.

"But the man said the next corner!" he exclaimed indignantly. "Doesn't the idiot know—"

He broke off with a sudden deep chuckle as his keen sense of humor came belatedly to his rescue. "I was talking about the wrong house all the time," he exclaimed. "Wouldn't that get you!"

His face still puzzled, the younger ball player turned hurriedly and came back to Locke's side.

"You mean the house on the next corner?" he asked quickly. "Was that where you saw this—Savage?"

"Sure thing!" answered Lefty. "Peach of a bull, wasn't it? But the fool agent said the next corner, and how was I to know he meant this one?"

Temple's lips began to twitch and his eyes to crinkle. A second later he threw back his head and burst into a shout of laughter, genuine, infectious, yet with a note in it of such relief that Lefty stared at him curiously. It wasn't possible that such a chap could have been nervous at the prospect of tackling a sneak thief.

"I can't help it," Temple said half apologetically when the violence of his mirth had begun to subside. "It seemed to strike me as funny—our hustling up the way we did. You certainly did get my goat for a bit, though," he went on frankly. "I've been careless, leaving things around, and wasn't keen about having 'em swiped. Besides, I couldn't for the life of me make out why anybody'd break into a house so early in the evening. Of course, since it was at Markham's you saw him, he probably didn't break in at all. Likely he's a friend of Harry's."

"Hum! Possibly, though the whole business

still seems rather odd. Who is this Markham, by the way?''

They were standing together beside the gate. Temple's manner had altered amazingly, becoming in a flash light-hearted and jocular.

''Manager of Crawford's sporting-goods shop,'' he answered. ''Who's this Savage, anyway—pugilist, ball player, or what?''

''A twirler from the sagebrush,'' answered Lefty absently.

He was thinking over the affair, and there were certain details which still seemed peculiar—such, for example, as the assurance which the fellow showed in moving about the apparently empty house. Lefty had half a mind to go on to Markham's and see if he could solve the mystery.

''That accounts for it,'' Temple went on. ''Harry knows more scrappers and ball players than you could count in a week. Well, what do you say to going back? I'd ask you into the house, only it's like a barn, and there's not a thing to eat around. Since the folks left, I've only been showing up to sleep, and sometimes not even for that. You were going to order supper at Mike's, weren't you?''

The Blue Stockings' pitcher nodded, and swung through the gate beside Temple, both starting to retrace their steps toward the restaurant. Remembering Savage's belligerent attitude at part-

ing, Lefty was not especially keen about stirring up something very likely to terminate in a fight. At least, Temple was cleared of all foreknowledge of the Western twirler, which was the principal thing just now.

It was not until they were seated on opposite sides of the neat table, and the waitress had taken Locke's order, that his companion broached the subject which must have been in his mind for some little time.

"Did you—er—come to Belle View on purpose to—see me?" he asked, with a touch of embarrassed hesitation.

Lefty smiled. "Yes," he answered quietly. "I secured you for Jack Kennedy this afternoon."

Temple's eyes widened, and a tide of deep crimson surged to the very roots of his blond hair.

"You can't mean—" he stammered, his hands gripping the table edge with unconscious force. "It isn't possible that the Blue Stockings want—Oh, say!" His face took on an expression of whimsical disbelief. "You're kidding me!"

"Not this time. I came East on purpose to get you for Kennedy's squad. Saw Jillson to-day, and now you're a Blue Stocking cub. Hope you're not sorry?"

"Sorry!" cried Temple, bringing down one clenched fist with a crash that made the dishes rattle. "Sorry! Why, I'd rather be that than

anything else on earth! It's the Big League club that I've always put ahead of all the others, but I never thought— Do you s'pose there's a chance of my making good?"

"If there wasn't," returned Lefty briefly, "you'd hardly have been picked by Jack Kennedy."

The man's modesty was refreshing, and his boyish impulsiveness held in it an inexplicable attraction for the more famous player. Before supper was over they were chatting together like old friends. When train time approached Temple helped the Big League pitcher into his heavy coat, and walked across to the station with him.

It lacked ten minutes or more of train time, so the two paced briskly up and down the length of the concrete platform, smoking, and making arrangements for their meeting a few days later to go South together.

"I'd sure like to make the trip with you," Temple said enthusiastically as they passed one of the waiting-room windows. "That'll give me time to see the folks, and— Mighty!"

He broke off with sudden vehemence, and, ripping open his coat, glanced at his watch. Scarcely seeming to look at it, he jammed it back, his face frowning and troubled.

"Had a date at nine," he explained rapidly to his companion. "Went clean out of my head.

Say, would you mind if I cut out now? Perhaps I can square myself yet."

"Go ahead, by all means," replied Lefty, thrusting out a gloved hand. "Good-by. Don't forget where we're to meet."

Temple gripped the pitcher's outstretched hand and wrung it.

"Not on your life!" he cried. "I've got it all straight. Hotel St. Albans next Tuesday for lunch. Awfully sorry to go this way, but you understand?"

Without even waiting for a reply, he turned and hurried along the platform, almost at a run. Lefty was still watching him, a faint smile on his lips, when the slamming of the station door made him glance carelessly around.

A square-shouldered, youngish man was standing by the door, pulling on a glove. His face was in the shadow, but a moment later he picked up his suit case and strolled directly toward Lefty. The latter watched him curiously, as one observes a lone fellow passenger at a country station. Then, as the unknown stepped into the circle of the nearest arc light, Locke caught his breath, every muscle stiffening instinctively as if he were bracing himself to withstand an inevitable shock. An instant later he had regained his composure.

"I hardly expected to see you quite so soon again, Savage," he drawled coolly.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRANSFORMATION

IN the brief, tense pause which followed, Lefty's dominating emotion was one of thankfulness that the station platform was deserted. The much delayed fight seemed bound to come off there and then, and Locke was not sorry. It was high time the fellow was shown a thing or two, and the Blue Stockings' twirler was not in the least averse to playing the part of instructor. He did object, however, to playing that part before a crowd of witnesses.

Determined to let Savage make the first hostile move, the Big League player deliberately held himself in check, standing quietly, watching his antagonist, and wondering why he did not begin. There was not enough light for him to catch the play of expression on the busher's face; consequently the shock of surprise which followed the fellow's first words was doubly great.

"So soon?" Savage repeated at length, in a quiet, almost drawling voice. "Surely there's been plenty of time for me to get here."

Lefty stared at him dazedly for a second before

he could find his voice. It was so totally different from what he had expected that for a moment he could not believe he had heard aright. Then the realization came suddenly that Savage was playing some game.

"Oh, plenty," he answered calmly; "only the time was so short I scarcely thought you'd be coming East."

Savage shrugged his shoulders, and put down the suitcase. "I don't remember saying that I wasn't," he returned quietly. "Have a cigarette?"

He extended an open box, and Lefty, retaining his composure with no little difficulty, accepted one. He refused to let this blustering braggart outdo him in self-control. What the man's game was he had not the remotest idea, but he was certain two could play at it, and he promptly proceeded to "stall along" until he could get the run of the cards.

"Thanks," he murmured nonchalantly, and produced a match box from his ulster pocket. "Light?"

As the flame flickered up Savage bent slightly toward it, his face clearly outlined to the smallest detail. Lefty, staring intently at him, could not detect a sign of that ungovernable fury which had characterized the busher at their first meeting less than a week before. He seemed as calm and un-

ruffled as if he had never worked himself into a violent temper at the man who had accepted his cigarette and who was now holding a lighted match for him.

The whole thing was such an anti-climax that Lefty could have laughed aloud had he not been so bewildered. As it was, he decided to let Savage do the talking, at least until he could determine how things really stood. With that idea in mind, he took his time, aware from the sound of the rapidly approaching train that a fresh diversion was coming to his assistance.

"Mind the smoker?" inquired Savage as the engine thundered past them. "We may as well sit together, then. It'll make the time pass quicker."

Locke acquiesced briefly, and they climbed aboard, picking out a seat. They were no sooner settled than Savage made some whimsical comments on two queer-looking characters sitting in front of them, and the Big League twirler, to his amazement, found himself chuckling appreciatively at his companion's dry humor.

It seemed incredible, yet he was actually finding the fellow likable. Tossing away the end of his cigarette, he pulled out a couple of cigars, and passed one over. Had any one predicted the action half an hour before, Lefty would have pronounced that person insane.

"From the way we parted," he said with sudden impulsiveness, "I'd hardly have said we'd be chumming it this way to-night."

Savage, busily cutting the end of his cigar, did not look up.

"Yes?" he murmured. "How so?"

Lefty stared. He had smelled liquor on the busher the afternoon they first met, but the man could scarcely have been so under the influence as to have no recollection of their altercation.

"You surely haven't forgotten that you wanted to lick the pants off me?" he asked.

The smile vanished from the Westerner's lips, and a flush swept into his face. "I'm sorry you remember it so vividly, Locke," he said, in a low, rather constrained tone. Lefty wondered whither had vanished all his slang and coarseness. "I must have been more of a beast than I thought." He hesitated, his slim fingers nervously rolling the cigar between them. "I was feeling pretty rotten that day. I had more booze in me than was healthy. And— Well, you understand, old man, how a fellow sometimes does things he's ashamed of."

He raised his head suddenly, and looked straight at Lefty with steady, level eyes which seemed to hold a hint of appeal in them. For a second Locke could have sworn that they were not the eyes of Savage at all, they were so totally differ-

ent from the lowering, evil-looking orbs he remembered. Then he realized that it was simply the absence of that baleful, uncanny glare which had impressed him so disagreeably. They were human now—human and winning, and decidedly attractive.

Suddenly Locke found himself answering the unspoken appeal eagerly.

"Forget it!" he said forcibly. "You don't suppose I took it as seriously as that, do you? I was giving you a little josh, that's all. Let's get on to something else. How'd you make out with Jack?"

"He's going to give me a show," Savage answered briefly. "Great chap, Kennedy."

"You bet your life he is!"

It was a subject on which Lefty could hold forth indefinitely, and when the train pulled into Jersey City he found that he had been doing most of the talking for twenty minutes or so. The announcement from Savage that he was going over to Brooklyn resulted in an unexpectedly hurried parting, and Locke had settled down in the uptown tunnel train before he realized that there were a number of things he had neglected to find out from the busher—among them the explanation of his curious actions in the Markham house.

"Doesn't make any difference, I reckon," he decided at length. "I'll see him again in less than a week. By George, what a transforma-

tion!" He shook his head slowly. "It's amazing. He's human now, and not a bad sort at all. I s'pose it must be drink that does it. Jove! If I had a devil like that inside me, which liquor unchained, it would be me for the sprinkler, and no dropping off either."

CHAPTER IX

THE TRAINING CAMP

DELAYED by a blizzard, Lefty and Gene Temple did not reach the sleepy little Southern town of Tulane until the second day of the spring training. Kennedy and his crowd of recruits had left for the ball park some time before, so the two belated ones stopped at the hotel only long enough to change into their baseball clothes before following them.

After the bitter cold, the snow and general disagreeableness, which they had left behind so short a time ago, there was an infinite relaxation in the soft, caressing warmth and brilliant sunshine of this Southern clime. The sky was deep blue, and cloudless. The trees were just bursting into bud, their branches covered with a delicate tracery of tender green. From the fresh-plowed fields came the indescribable odor of new-turned earth. Somewhere a bird was caroling joyously.

There was something about it all which sent a thrill through the Blue Stockings' pitcher, bringing back in a vivid flash the remembrance of this time a year ago, when he had appeared, unknown

and unwelcome, at the Texas training camp of the famous Hornets.

His experience there had been fraught with much hard feeling. It was exceptional, to be sure; but it had, nevertheless, been the cause of his looking forward to the trip this year with the reverse of pleasure. He had never actually clothed the dislike with conscious thought. He was not even fully aware of it until this very moment, when, with his blood beginning to tingle in his veins, he drew in the soft, fragrant air in deep gulps, and realized that the prejudice had vanished, that he was glad to be alive and here.

"Pretty slick, isn't it?" he said aloud, glancing at Temple.

The latter nodded, and answered with a brief affirmative. His face was slightly flushed; his eyes were bright. Lefty smiled a little as he realized that the youngster was just where he had been a year ago—eager, dubious, thrilled with anticipation, devoured with curiosity, and more than a little nervous. It made Locke appear older and amazingly experienced. That single year which separated him from Temple seemed infinitely longer in retrospection than it had been in passing.

Presently the long line of unpainted high board fence showed ahead of them, and instinctively the two players broke into a trot. Neither of

them spoke. Their spikes sank into the warm earth. Their eyes were fixed upon the arching spheres of white that curved into view above the fence, to fall swiftly away in swallow flight below that line of dingy boardings.

Through the gate they trotted; then Lefty halted for a moment, eying with interest the busy scene. Scattered over the field were eighteen or twenty men, in uniforms of various sorts, engaged in almost equally varied exercises. Some merely tossed a baseball back and forth slowly, stiffly, and with occasional facial contortions which made Lefty grin sympathetically. He knew from experience the discomfort, almost the torture, of that "second" morning. Half a dozen were passing the medicine ball about a circle. In front of the stand others were batting the slow, straight balls pitched to them by Jack Kennedy himself.

As Locke took it all in, he felt again that tingling thrill of enthusiasm. In spite of the toil and drudgery, the aches and pains and stiffness ahead of him, he saw the distant goal lying beyond everything, and was glad to be here.

"Take it easy, Mac!" sounded in old Jack's crisp tones. "You may want some of that smoke later on."

Chuckling, Locke moved forward, closely followed by Temple. A moment later the manager was gripping the southpaw's hand and asking the

inevitable questions in that earnest tone of his which robbed it of its perfunctoriness.

"Fine!" responded Lefty promptly. "Held up by a blizzard north of Washington, but I reckon it won't take long to catch up with the bunch. This is Gene Temple, Jack."

Kennedy shook hands with the recruit, his keen dark eyes sweeping over the youngster from head to foot.

"You look pretty fit," he commented. "A mite soft, maybe, but we'll soon fix that. Just take my place for a bit. Straight, easy balls, you know. We don't want any fireworks yet a while."

Handing over the ball, he stepped aside and watched Temple for a few minutes, correcting him when he seemed to be putting on a little too much speed.

"Hardest thing in the world to keep 'em down at first," he said, turning to Lefty, with a grim smile. "He won't hardly be able to move that wing to-morrow morning if he ain't careful."

"Don't I know it!" laughed Locke as they moved a little farther back, where the manager could overlook the entire squad. "Well, how's tricks? I suppose Nels Savage showed up all right?"

Kennedy flashed a swift, oddly inquiring glance at his premier pitcher.

"What makes you ask that?" he asked briefly.

"Because I'm interested," was the equally brief answer.

"Hum!" Kennedy's eyes shifted out across the field. "Easy, there, Coombs! Don't put too much on the old soup bone!" he yelled. Then he glanced back at Lefty. "I didn't know he was such a friend o' yours," he went on quietly. "It sure didn't seem so, the way you met up on my porch a couple of weeks ago."

The southpaw laughed. "We weren't then," he explained. "Can't say that we're so awful chummy now, either. I just happened to run into him again around New York, and changed the opinion I'd formed of him when we first met."

"That so?" drawled the manager. "Funny—but I did the same identical thing, only it wasn't a change for the better. I'm afraid Sackett picked a lemon that time. He's a booze fighter. I landed here Monday night, and he showed up next morning, full as a tick and devilish! There ain't any other word to express it. When he's got a load aboard he's the limit. I reckon he must have been in that condition when you first ran into him."

"Guess he was," returned Lefty. "Jove, that's mighty hard lines, Jack! Sober, he's as decent a chap as you'd want around. What are you going to do—ship him back to the sticks?"

Kennedy's eyes snapped. "Not unless I have

to. I'm going to boost him aboard the water wagon, and keep him there. He hasn't had a drop since he landed here, and I'll see that he don't get it. There's a chance to make something good out of him if he'll only do a little trying on his own hook, for he's pretty clever with the horsehide."

"Don't you worry about that, Jack," the pitcher forcibly assured him, a remembrance of Savage's brief, halting half confession on the train flashing into his mind. "He'll work with you, all right, or I've got him sized up far wrong. I reckon he must be one of those poor devils who let alcohol get a strangle hold, and then can't shake it off. I'll do anything I can to help—if you care to have me."

"Good idea," agreed Kennedy, pulling out his watch. "I can't have him in sight every minute. Well, it's time we were breaking up the morning session. I'll see you at the hotel, Lefty. I got to chase down and send a wire to Larry. He's on the road with some theater company, and I haven't located him yet."

Turning away, he raised his voice in a stentorian shout: "Everybody run in!" Then he made straight for a horse and buggy hitched in the shadow of the stand.

For a minute or two Lefty stood watching the players as they stopped instantly whatever they

were doing and jogged toward the gate. Then, recognizing Savage as one of those who had been in the medicine-ball circle, his eyes brightened, and he moved hastily forward.

He hadn't the least idea of trying anything so crude as an open attempt at reformation. He simply wanted to say a word of greeting to the man he had taken such a decided interest in; he wished to renew the pleasant intercourse which had been cut off so abruptly that night on the platform of the Hudson River tube. So he ran after the square-shouldered, muscular figure bringing up the rear of the jogging line, and clapped him on the back in a friendly fashion.

"Well, old scout, how goes it?" he cried. "Glad to see you escaped from the wilds of Brooklyn all right."

The busher stopped abruptly, whirling round with a savage yank that jerked his shoulder from Locke's light touch.

"Keep your hands off me!" he snarled, glaring balefully from under lowering brows. "What in blazes do you mean, pawing me like that? If we was only away by our two selves I'd knock the dome off you so quick you wouldn't know what hit you!"

For a moment Lefty stared in utter astonishment at the dark, sneering face, with its snarling lips and evil, glowering eyes. There was no smell

of liquor about the fellow; he was absolutely sober.

Suddenly the sting of those unprovoked insults penetrated that mental armor of bewildered amazement. It send the crimson tide of indignation surging into Locke's face; brought a hard, cold glint into his eyes. A swift side glance told him that the last straggler had almost reached the gate. He took a step forward, and regarded Savage for a moment from under drooping lids.

"You've been shooting off considerable hot air since I first saw you," he remarked coldly. "I'm rather curious to know if there's anything back of it. We're never likely to be more alone than we are this minute. Suppose you start in with that licking you've been blowing so much about? Come ahead! I'm ready."

CHAPTER X

A PERPLEXING QUESTION

SAVAGE made no effort to accept Lefty's militant invitation. He did not stir or utter a word, but remained glaring at Locke with a concentration which gave the southpaw a queer and decidedly unpleasant sensation. He was vividly reminded of an occasion when he had stood before one of the glass dens in the Bronx Park reptile house, staring into the bright, evil eyes of a very active cobra which had reared itself belligerently.

The stillness became oddly prolonged. The busher's eyes seemed to widen and grow larger. Locke was conscious of a peculiar sense of lethargy which changed swiftly to irritation at the fellow who seemed to be trying to stare him down. Suddenly he gave a determined shake of his head.

"Well," he demanded curtly, "aren't you going to start something?"

Savage drew back abruptly, an expression akin to disappointment flickering across his face.

"Say," he rasped harshly, "what kind of a sucker do you think I am? I'd start to beat you

up in this ball park, and how soon do you s'pose it would be before Kennedy landed on my neck?"

"Who's going to put him wise?"

"If I once got going right you'd sure be a walking advertisement of what had happened. The whole crowd would be wise soon as they lamped you. Nix! You don't get me in bad with the old man that way!"

Lefty's lips curled. "Sure that's the real reason?" he inquired sarcastically. "Looks to me as if you were crawling."

The busher's fists clenched and his face flushed darkly. For a second it seemed that he meant to fly at the throat of the man who had taunted him. Locke's muscles stiffened; he braced himself instinctively to withstand the shock. But it never came.

"It won't work," growled Savage through his clenched teeth. "I'll get you before I'm through, but not until I have a place with this crowd cinched. Another thing—there ain't a bit of use in your coming around with that soft stuff, 'cause it don't go. I don't like a hair of your head, and trying that brand o' bunk will only start ructions —see?"

The last word had scarcely left his lips when he turned and strode rapidly across the field toward the gate. Lefty, scarlet with rage at the insulting tone, took half a dozen swift steps after him be-

fore cooling second thought put on the brake. It was one thing to defend himself against assault, quite another deliberately to start a rough-house, in spite of even as great a provocation as this. It would be a poor way in which to repay Kennedy's exceptional faith in him by fostering what the manager feared above almost any other calamity—dissension and hard feeling among members of his team.

"Just about one more crack like that, though, and you'll get yours," muttered the southpaw angrily, coming to a halt. "Jove, what a mucker! He ought to have the rudiments of decency beaten into his thick skull with a club. Soft stuff—bah!"

To a man whose friendship and acquaintance was sought with a frequency which is almost tiresome, the insinuation that he would deliberately try to win over such a creature as this by flattery was irritating to the limit. Nor was Lefty's irritation at all assuaged by the realization that in a far-fetched sort of way he had placed himself open to the annoyance.

"But how could I know he'd be like this?" he growled as he moved slowly toward the gate, his face still crimson with indignation. "Jack said he was sober—and so he was. How could a fellow guess that any human being would change like that? Why, on the train he was as decent a sort—"

He broke off abruptly, with a start of surprise, the anger in his face giving place swiftly to puzzled thoughtfulness. How did he know that the fellow had ever really changed? Might not that pose of friendliness have been altogether a pretense?

Such a supposition would indicate amazing ability at acting on the part of this crude individual from the Western bushes, but it was far from impossible. Even more difficult to understand was the man's motive in perpetuating such a deception. Why should his manner toward Lefty be so different in Belle View from that shown at Deering, or later here in Georgia? What had he gained, or hoped to gain, by a pose which must have been not only difficult but extremely onerous?

The question puzzled Locke all the way back to the hotel. He could think of no plausible answer save that Savage had desired to divert attention from some one or something in the quiet Jersey suburb. It was a bit far-fetched, perhaps, yet by assuming that guise of friendliness he had certainly so surprised and engrossed Lefty as to make him totally forgetful of the odd circumstance of the busher's presence in the little country town.

If this supposition were correct, a lot of puzzling queries leaped into life like Hydra heads. None was more difficult that the last of all which popped suddenly into the southpaw's mind, just

as he came within sight of the hotel: Why had Savage refused to fight?

The obvious explanation would have been: Because he was afraid—because, like most loud-mouthed, blustering braggarts, he was a coward at heart. But Lefty had a strong impression that this was not the case. Much as he disliked the man, he had never had the least doubt of his courage. The ruffian had been ready enough twice before to resort to violence. What motive held him back now?

CHAPTER XI

A VOICE OUT OF DARKNESS

THANKS to the irritating nature of the encounter on the field, and the swarm of unanswerable questions it had aroused, Lefty entered the hotel in a decidedly ill humor. The delight and keen enthusiasm he had felt that morning were quite gone; in their place had come a sense of ill treatment.

After the sacrifice he had made in coming down ahead of the other regulars, and practically giving a week of his time to coaching these raw recruits from all over the country, it seemed as if fortune had played him a scurvy trick by bringing into his sphere such an irritant as Nelson Savage was likely to become.

"Wonder if I didn't make a mistake, after all, in keeping my hands off him?" muttered Lefty, glancing around the lobby. "There won't be any living with the dog until he's been taken down by a thorough thrashing, and— Well, for Pete's sake, look who's here!"

In a flash the frown was swept from his face by a grin of surprised delight as he leaped toward

the tall, wiry young man who stood at one end of the desk, talking and laughing with Jack Kennedy.

"Al, you old villain," he cried, gripping the newcomer's hands in both of his, "where the deuce do you hail from? I'm certainly glad to see that homely mug of yours again."

Al Ogan's response to the greeting was equally hearty. The two had been fellow-cubs a year before in peppery Jim Brennan's famous Hornet organization, and Lefty had got along better with the clever young infielder than with any other member of the team except his particular chum, Buck Fargo.

"Haven't been doing a thing in the twirling line since I saw you last, have you?" Ogan inquired, one arm resting on Locke's shoulder. "It's a wonder you wouldn't get a wiggle on and make some kind of a reputation for yourself."

The southpaw laughed. "Time enough for that, old scout. We're likely to show you a trick or two this season. But, say, what in the name of sense brought you down here? What license have you got to come snooping around our promising growth from the timber regions?"

Ogan showed a fine set of teeth in a wide grin. "Doesn't seem to occur to you that I might be here for the purpose of giving you rubes a few lessons in the art of playing the national game," he remarked, with twinkling eyes.

Lefty stared. "You're kidding, aren't you?" he asked, darting a swift, inquiring glance at Kennedy.

Evidently there was something in the latter's face which gave away the situation, for Locke suddenly brought his open palm down across the manager's shoulders with a force which shook old Jack.

"Why, you deceiving old reprobate!" exclaimed the pitcher. "So this is how you filled Spider's place? I'll be hanged! Never even gave me a chance to ask what luck you had with first. It was on the tip of my tongue three or four times this morning, but you always choked me off."

"Thought I'd give you a surprise," chuckled Kennedy. "From the way you looked a while back, I should say you needed one. What's eating you, anyhow?"

Lefty had not the slightest intention of letting either man know of his clash with Savage; it would savor entirely too much of talebearing to suit him. He smiled blandly, convincingly, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing," he drawled. "No, Jack, if I seemed at all serious, it must have been caused by the thought of wasting a perfectly good week of freedom watching you do the Solomon act with this crowd from the sagebrush. Now that Al's here, life will be more bearable."

Kennedy laughed and moved away toward the proprietor's office, leaving Locke and Ogan to talk things over.

Lefty was more than pleased at the encounter. The young Ohioan was a college graduate and a good fellow in every sense of the word. Personally Locke had always liked him, and just at present he would have welcomed a much less agreeable member of the old squad. It gave him some one of his own status to talk to; some one who knew men and conditions of the baseball world, and who did not spend any time either eying the famous southpaw with surreptitious awe, or jealously tearing to pieces his hard-earned reputation.

Within ten minutes the two had decided to room together. They sat side by side in the dining-room, and when the hour for afternoon practice approached went out to the field together.

Without appearing to do so, Lefty kept an observant eye that afternoon on Nelson Savage, and discovered, as he rather expected to, that the fellow was not a general favorite. So far as could be seen, he was on speaking terms with just two members of the squad. The remainder of the recruits he treated with contemptuous disdain; if one could judge by the biting comments cast in his direction, the dislike was mutual.

Of course it was impossible at this early day to obtain any idea of his professional skill. Beyond

handling a baseball with a certain amount of deftness, he showed no particular ability; nor was he likely to for some time to come. As for his physical condition, Lefty was surprised at the discovery that the fellow was much too heavy, and extremely short-winded. He puffed and panted when he joined the file that Kennedy led at a trot around the inside of the fence; and he didn't last five minutes when lured into the diabolical "high-low" game.

Many of the other recruits were out of condition, but none of them quite as badly as this, and Locke naturally laid it to the busher's intemperate habits. That evening after dinner, sitting in the lobby with Kennedy and Ogan, a quick suspicion came to him at the sight of Savage slipping out of the hotel alone.

"I thought you were keeping an eye on that fellow, Jack?" he remarked, in a low tone. "What's to prevent him digging up some redeye in the village?"

Kennedy laughed, leaning back comfortably. "Evidently you don't know Tulane, son. The place is so dry that a quart of bourbon would look like the flood. Only way he could smuggle it in is on the railroad, and the boys are all good friends of mine that I've tipped off to look out for that sort of thing. Unsociable grouch, ain't he? Goes

off alone 'most every night just like that. You'd think he'd get tired of himself, wouldn't you?''

''Where does he go?'' Lefty asked.

''Oh, moving pictures, I reckon. I followed him the first couple of times, and found him down there.'' He yawned. ''There ain't no danger of his getting firewater now. The trouble'll come when the push lands on us. They're supposed to be on the water wagon, an' most of 'em are; but you know how some of 'em carry flasks for colds, which they're likely to leave around permiscuous-like.''

Lefty could not take the manager's easy-going point of view. He knew that in country towns like Tulane the films are sometimes changed only once a week—never oftener than twice weekly. Unless a man was an absolute crank on the subject, he could scarcely care to see the same series of pictures three or four times in succession. It looked rather as if the busher had been clever enough to prepare a sort of alibi for himself which made it possible for him to slip away every evening without arousing the manager's suspicions.

Presently Kennedy went off to write letters. A few moments later Locke and Ogan strolled into the billiard room to see if there was anything doing. They found a flourishing game of draw

in progress, and, being urged to "sit in," Ogan succumbed without a struggle. Lefty shook his head, however, watched the play absently for a few minutes, and finally walked out through the lobby into the street. He had given in to the pull of mingled curiosity and conscience, and found not a particle of pleasure in doing so.

Tulane was certainly small, and, at night, at least, most undoubtedly "dead." It supported two moving-picture establishments, nevertheless, which rather weakened the southpaw's theory regarding Savage's inability to find continued amusement at picture-plays, but did not make him abandon his determination to learn if such was the man's practice.

Entering the Palace Theater, he was fortunate in finding the lights up for the accommodation of a vaudeville turn. The seating capacity was not large, and in five minutes he was certain that Savage was not in the place. At the Tulane Opera House the wait was longer, but the result the same. By the time he had reached the street again Lefty's interest in the search had quite swallowed up the reluctance with which he had started it.

The question now was, not to pick and choose from a multitude of places where Savage might have gone, but to hunt out one solitary spot or

building which would attract the fellow or serve the purpose which Lefty felt sure was moving him.

A baker's shop was open, Locke discovered as he moved slowly down the street; but its feeble light was the only one flickering amid the rows of low-fronted, quaint old shops. It was like hunting a needle in a haystack.

Presently, without any hope of success, the pitcher wandered through some of the rambling, curving residence streets near the river. Here the lights, save those from the houses themselves, were few and far between, and there seemed so little chance of anything doing that he was about to turn back when he became suddenly aware that two people were approaching from the direction of the river road.

Stopping abruptly, he heard the murmur of men's voices; but the darkness was so intense that it was impossible to see more than the shadowy outlines of objects a dozen feet away. For a moment he hesitated; then, stepping back against the hedge which bordered the place on his right, he found he could easily push through. A second later he was standing on the other side of the flowering magnolia shrubs.

The action had been governed by impulse—and just the faintest suggestion of familiarity in one

of the unknown voices. Almost immediately the raucous, angry accents of Nelson Savage reached Lefty's ears.

"Why, you fresh young squirt!" said the pitcher to his companion. "I've got a good mind to put old Kennedy wise to what I know."

There was a momentary pause, during which the steps sounded loud and clear, as if the men were passing on the other side of the hedge. In his desire to find out who the other person was, Locke bent eagerly forward, his ears strained.

"I hardly think you'll do that," came at length in a low, composed voice. "You see, I happen to know a thing or two myself, and I might be forced in self-defense—"

That was all. The man did not cease speaking, but a movement of his head, or a little eddy of wind, perhaps, turned the words into an unrecognizable murmur.

Lefty did not need anything further. Already he had heard enough to amaze him. The voice of the second man was that of Gene Temple.

CHAPTER XII

A BIT OF A STAGGERER

LOCKE could scarcely believe his senses. Temple with Nels Savage, and showing by his words every evidence of a previous acquaintance! It seemed almost impossible. During the past week the southpaw had seen a good deal of the latest recruit to the Blue Stockings' pitching staff, and the close proximity of a three days' railroad journey, instead of opening Lefty's eyes to unexpected defects in his companion's character, had served, rather, to make him like the blond youngster even more than he had at first. Temple could not be said to possess any extraordinary mental strength or depth, but he was certainly likable, and it was difficult to believe that he had deliberately lied.

Yet how else was the affair to be explained? The voice of that second passer-by was Temple's, Lefty was certain. Back in Belle View the fellow had denied any previous acquaintance with the Western twirler. There was only one inference to draw, much as Locke might dislike the idea or consider it incredible.

All this passed through the latter's mind in the few seconds while he stood crouching behind the magnolia hedge, waiting for the men to get far enough away for him to emerge without fear of detection.

Determined to prove his suspicions and become absolutely certain, Lefty's first impulse was to follow the two until a street light enabled him to see with his own eyes. But as he pushed through the hedge and paused for an instant on the sidewalk, a better way occurred to him. Knowing little about the streets and byways of Tulane, he had, nevertheless, a shrewd notion that the way he had come was shorter by far than the route the others seemed to be following back to the hotel. By swiftly retracing his steps, he could reach the lobby ahead of them.

Silently he slipped back to the entrance of the narrow lane through which he had reached the river road, and darted into it. Five minutes later he emerged on a wider street and made all speed toward the lighted corner beyond, which he remembered turning not a great while after leaving Main Street.

As he made this hurried, silent progress through the fragrant darkness and quiet of the village streets, his mind was keenly active. With this latest discovery several suspicious happenings in Belle View, unnoticed at the time, came back with

swift, vivid significance. Temple's manner when he had first heard of Savage's presence in the town had been just a little odd. Considering the circumstances, it was hardly natural for a chap of his sort to be so greatly upset by the incident of a strange person seen in his house; his intense relief at the discovery of the truth had been proportionately queer. At the station, too, that sudden recollection of a forgotten engagement had been oddly timed with Savage's appearance.

"Might easily have caught a glimpse of Savage through the window, and used that excuse to beat it before the man came out and saw him," reflected Lefty as he turned into Main Street and hastily approached the hotel. "I'd certainly never have thought he was that sort, hanged if I would!" His face clouded disappointedly, and he frowned slightly. "Even now it doesn't seem like him. Well, I'll know in a jiffy just what's what."

A swift glance down the street showed nothing of the ill-assorted pair, and Locke wasted no time entering the hotel. The lobby was deserted save for the desk clerk, invisible behind an open newspaper; from the billiard room came sounds of talk and laughter which brought the southpaw over to the doorway.

The poker game was still in progress, and gathered about the table was a ring of spectators which accounted easily for the empty lobby. Neither

Temple nor Savage was there; this Locke assured himself with a slight nod of satisfaction. He was about to turn back to the lobby when he discovered that Al Ogan was likewise missing.

For a second he paused, brows arching in surprise. The first baseman was a poker fiend, if ever one lived; to imagine him voluntarily dropping out of a game was difficult.

"What happened to Al, Mac?" the pitcher asked abruptly. "Thought he'd stay with you all the evening."

"Huh?" absently grunted Jack Mackentire, raising his eyes from the cards. "Oh! Why, a kid came in with a note for him, and he beat it without saying where he was going. Didn't seem keen about leaving, either. Want him special?"

"Oh, no," said Lefty. "He'll be back soon, I guess."

It seemed a rather curious performance, for Ogan had only just arrived, and could scarcely have any friends in the place outside the squad. Still, it was none of Lefty's business, and the southpaw turned back toward the lobby.

As he passed through the doorway he stopped short with a gasp of amazement. Just emerging from the little cubby-hole of a writing-room—a spot patronized mainly by drummers and their ilk—was Gene Temple. He was in the act of stretching luxuriously, head thrown back, mouth gaping,

arms extended. Clasped in one hand were three sealed letters, written on the hotel stationery.

"Why, I thought—" began Locke. His teeth came together with a click as he realized that he had been speaking aloud.

Temple came forward, smiling. "Nothing gives a fellow a more virtuous feeling than answering a bunch of letters," he drawled. "Look at those."

Lefty had already observed them. "Must have taken you most of the time since dinner," he said, with swiftly returning composure.

"Not quite; but I've been at it—"

Whether the sentence was ever finished or not the southpaw was quite unaware. He was standing where, by shifting his glance a trifle to the left, he commanded an uninterrupted view of the main entrance. The sound of voices made him glance thither now. The sight of Al Ogan entering with Nelson Savage, and talking to the fellow with all the seeming good humor in the world, was enough to drive every other thought from the pitcher's bewildered brain.

CHAPTER XIII

WHICH ONE?

"LETTERS generally are a nuisance," Lefty found himself saying, in an instinctive effort at self-control. "I'd certainly like to have mine all written up."

He wondered if his voice sounded as queerly to Temple as it did to himself. The youngster's face showed no particular surprise; perhaps he was too immersed in his own thoughts to notice the oddness of his companion's tone.

Locke's eyes were fixed on the two men crossing the lobby; his mind was striving to find some reason or explanation for their being together. Ogan could not have been the one he had heard while crouching behind the magnolia hedge. He had never even seen Savage before this afternoon, much less known him in the intimate fashion indicated by the few words Lefty had overheard. He must have met the fellow by accident—perhaps just outside the door. It was absurd to suppose there was any prearrangement about it.

Temple moved away with a casual remark about posting his letters. The other two came on, headed for the billiard room door. Savage passed

the southpaw without a word, and with a sneering uptwist of the lips which at any other time would have made Locke long to hit him. Just now, however, Lefty was too intent on something else even to notice it.

The busher's face was flushed, his eyes were a bit glassy, his breath fairly reeked with the smell of liquor. In spite of Kennedy's confidence to the contrary, the man had found a way to get whisky in the sleepy little town of Tulane.

With wrinkled forehead and puzzled eyes, the southpaw turned and watched the man enter the billiard room. How had the thing been managed? Had some one broken faith, or was there an element of mystery in the affair which—

"A bit more, and he'd have as nice a little load aboard as you'd want to see."

The voice at his elbow was low and drawling, with an undercurrent of laughter in it. For a fraction of a second, Lefty found himself wondering how in creation Temple could have returned so soon from posting his letters. Then suddenly he realized that it wasn't Temple at all—could not possibly be, and, whirling, he looked into Al Ogan's smiling countenance.

As he stood staring, Locke felt that his face was flushing visibly. Had the tangled affair begun so to wear upon his mind that even for a second he could mistake one man's voice for another's?

"I wonder—where—he got it?" he managed to stammer at last.

"Give it up," said Ogan, occupied with lighting a cigarette. "He had it when I—er—ran into him a while ago—down the street."

Lefty drew a long breath; the blood began to flow normally through his veins again. The likeness was still there; his mind had not been playing tricks. Certain tones and inflections of Ogan's voice were almost identical with Temple's. He had never noticed it before, but that was probably because he had never compared the two. In a second the southpaw was smiling his old careless, good-humored smile, and declining a cigarette from Ogan's proffered box.

"Guess I won't, thanks," he said. "I'm cutting 'em out except one after meals. Rather a good one on Jack, isn't it? He was so sure there was no bugjuice to be found in Tulane. You must have beat it out of here sort of unexpected, old man."

The infielder stepped past his friend and glanced into the billiard room. "Oh, I don't know," he returned over his shoulder. "I got tired of the game."

Locke raised his eyebrows. It was difficult to imagine this possible.

"Going to sit in again now?" he asked indifferently.

"Nix! It's me for the hay when I finish this smoke."

He turned from the open door, and dropped down on one of the leather chairs facing the main entrance. Lefty followed, outwardly indifferent, but in reality keenly observant. Whether Ogan was lying or telling the truth, there was certainly something on his mind, and while the southpaw was still curious as to what it might be, he no longer felt that phase of the mystery to be vital.

Whether it was Ogan or Temple he had heard covertly threatening Savage was really of no great consequence, after all. It was unpleasant, to be sure, and vastly disappointing, to realize that one of the men he had come to like so well was deceiving him; but that was all. Of much greater importance was the learning of where and how Savage obtained his liquor. To this end Lefty meant to devote some of his spare time.

Temple returned presently from posting his letters. After a few casual remarks, he departed for his room, leaving the southpaw puzzled anew at the odd likeness of those two voices, and wondering why he had failed to notice it before. He was still pondering when the poker session broke up and the crowd sauntered back into the lobby with much talk and laughter.

Only Savage seemed in a state of persistent ill temper. He stood close by, growling at Pete

Zacher, one of the few members of the squad who tolerated him at all; and Lefty could readily believe old Jack's statement that the fellow was "fairly devilish" when he was drinking.

"That's some classy ring you've got, bo," he heard Zacher remark suddenly. "Let's take a slant at it for a minute."

He indicated a heavy gold ring, oddly carved, which Locke had noticed before on the little finger of the busher's left hand. Savage scowled.

"It ain't never been off my finger, an' I'm not going to take it off now," he grunted disagreeably. "I guess you'll manage to live without lamping it any closer."

It was not so much what he actually said as the nasty manner in which the words were spoken that caused Locke to turn away disgustedly and start Ogan on his way to bed.

"The ill-mannered mule!" he muttered under his breath as he crossed the lobby beside his friend. "I'm hanged if I bother my head any more about him! He can lap up all the jingle juice between here and New York for all I care. Let him accumulate a roaring jag and start an all-round rough-house so that he'll get the sack. I'm not going to stir a finger to prevent it."

All this "listened well," as Ogan would have said had it reached his ears; but deep down within him Lefty knew that he didn't mean it. He was

aware that the following evening would probably see him playing the thankless rôle of sleuth in an effort to discover Savage's secret and keep the promise he had rashly made to Jack Kennedy.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE TRAIL

THE pitcher's intuition proved accurate save in one particular. From necessity, not choice, he fully expected to do his detective work alone. Neither Temple nor Ogan was to be trusted. He did not mean to trouble Kennedy until something definite had been discovered. And there was no one else.

Returning from morning practice, however, Lefty had scarcely set foot in the hotel lobby when he was staggered by the full weight of one hundred and fifty pounds of solid bone and muscle landing violently against him. His first impulse was to return the assault with interest. Then, recognizing in time the freckled face and snapping brown eyes of his classmate, Jack Stillman, he contented himself with a blow on the latter's shoulders which brought an involuntary grunt from the reporter.

"Still the same impulsive young thing," said Locke. "Does a chap good to pipe that freckled phiz of yours after watching a field of uninteresting bushers all the morning."

"They can't all be like you, kid," chuckled Stillman as they gripped each other's hands firmly. "Well, how's tricks? What sort of a bunch has Jack pulled in from the tall timbers this year? Any ginger in 'em?"

"Oh, fair. It's a wonder, though, you wouldn't get on the job with the rest of the ink slingers. What's the *Star* doing without those yarns of yours that tell so little with such a flow of language?"

Stillman grinned. "It doesn't have to do without them," he said, with an airy wave of his hand. "They're showing up in their proper column every day. You see, I had to chase out and cover the Dawson City fight, and that delayed me three days. The boss was for sending down an understudy, but I wouldn't listen to that. Told him to leave it to me, and he'd have his stuff right on the dot. I had to dope out the copy before I left."

"Before you left?" repeated Lefty amusedly.

"Sure! Nothing ever happens in a training camp the first few days, except getting stiff and sore, and limbering up. Kennedy gave me a few tips just before he left home, and so the faking was dead easy. I headed one column with a nice little pome written especially for the occasion, trimmed the whiskers off a lot of prehistoric dope, and there you are."

Lefty laughed. Stillman could usually be

counted on for doing the unexpected, and there were few dull moments in training camp after his arrival.

"I hope the poetry was guaranteed strictly original and—fresh," the southpaw remarked as they moved toward the stairs.

"You bet!" returned the reporter. "Some of it was so fresh that old Deering said it was raw."

He paused before the desk, and, striking an attitude, solemnly declaimed:

"It seems most humiliating,
When you've made a perfect slide,
To be blamed for stealing, just because
The base was occupied."

"How's that?" he inquired, without the shadow of a smile. "Got Rudyard Kip and Damon Runyon fanning, hey? Don't like it? Hump! No accounting for tastes. Maybe this'll suit you better. I tossed it off with a couple of dozen other little quatrains and rondeaus and sonnets on the train right after breakfast:

"His fielding average may be low;
It really doesn't matter,
If he hits 'em on the nose
Whene'er they nick the platter."

"Help!" gasped Lefty, laying violent hands on the poetic one. "That's enough. They're worse than the soup ads in the street cars."

He swept the newspaper man irresistibly out of the lobby and up the uncarpeted stairs.

"You certainly are one faker!" he chuckled as they reached the second floor. "Cut out that stuff for a bit, though, and listen to me." His face grew suddenly serious. "There's something doing here that's about got my goat, Jack. Suppose you focus the light of your keen old brain on the mystery, and see if you can't do the Sherlock Holmes act."

Stillman shed his light and airy manner, and was instantly all attention and interest. There was no keener mind on the staff of the big metropolitan daily, and more than once he had earned the praise of the city editor by a neat bit of detective work. Locke did not find it possible now to go into the matter in any great detail, for Ogan was already back from his shower when they reached the room. Before lunch time, however, he managed to give his friend the essential particulars, and on the way to the field they discussed every phase of the situation.

"You're right in not bothering with Temple or Ogan," decided Stillman. "One of 'em knew this Savage before, of course; but that's not important. The main thing is to find where he gets his ardent. If he cuts away again to-night we'll be ready for him."

Stillman devoted the better part of the after-

noon to an exhaustive study of the sagebrush twirler. The opinion he formed of the man was far from flattering.

"Gee, that dill pickle must hate himself!" he remarked to Lefty as they were returning to the hotel. "Of course, the stiff may turn out to be a little baby wonder on wheels, but as it looks now I'd call him a dead loss. He's the kind that would have a whole club fighting in two shakes, and—honest, old man—the best thing we can do is to give him all the rope he wants, and let him hang himself."

This had been Lefty's real opinion for some time, but his promise to Kennedy, and a sort of ethical determination to do the best he could for a rival, made him reluctant to act upon it. The two friends were still discussing the matter when old Jack caught up with them.

"Look here, son," he began briefly, taking Locke's arm, "McLean tells me Savage had half a jag on last night. Is that straight?"

The southpaw hesitated an instant. "I'd hardly call it that," he answered. "He'd been hitting the bottle a bit, but he wasn't exactly loaded."

"By mighty!" exploded the manager. "You knew, an' never put me wise! I thought you was going to help me out? I can't see everything that goes on. Why in—"

"Take it easy," said Lefty. "I wasn't holding back on you. I just didn't want to get you all riled up before I had something to tell. It was this way."

Briefly he narrated the scanty details he had gleaned the night before, ending with the suggestion that the best way of straightening out the affair would be to send Savage back to the bushes.

"Not yet," returned the manager, his jaw squaring obstinately. "I told you once before that I was going to make something out of him. I've handled others as bad—or worse. I want to find out where he gets the stuff, and it's up to you to help out. You ain't got nothing to do, and if he cuts away to-night you and Jack can follow him as well as not."

Of course Locke gave in. He felt that he owed Jack Kennedy a great deal, and he was ready to go to much more trouble for him than the loss of a single evening would involve. As soon as dinner was over Stillman and Lefty strolled out into the lobby, where, while apparently occupied in light conversation, they kept a close watch on the movements of Nelson Savage.

They had only a short time to wait. The object of their attention did not even sit down. After inquiring fruitlessly for mail, he lounged against the desk for a minute or two; then, moving toward

the door with exaggerated carelessness, he disappeared into the street.

Within thirty seconds Locke and the reporter were standing by the steps, watching the square-shouldered figure swing along Main Street in the direction of the moving-picture houses—also the river road.

"Same way he came back last night," Lefty commented, in a whisper.

Stillman nodded, leading the way across the street. They moved swiftly forward, keeping well in the shadows. When Savage had passed the bright lights of the Tulane Opera House and vanished into the dusky stretches beyond, the pursuers hurriedly decreased the intervening distance until they could distinguish the sound of the man's feet as he strode briskly along the graveled walk.

Now and then the sound ceased, as if the busher were listening for possible indications of pursuit. Each time the pair behind him stopped also, though they had been walking with the utmost care in the soft dust of the country road.

At length Savage seemed satisfied that he had aroused no suspicion, and thereafter there were no more halts or backward glances. Briskly he strode on past fences and trim hedges, past twinkling lights, past black, deserted stretches, or tall white columns gleaming vague and ghostlike in the starlight.

More than once the two friends wondered silently where he could be leading them. Each one was game and meant to stick it out as long as his companion; so they tramped on, out along the lonely river road, until suddenly the sound of Savage's footfalls ceased abruptly.

They did not grow gradually less and less, finally to die away. There was no noticeable pause or lagging in the step before the last. At one instant they heard the brisk, regular sound of the man's feet in the dusty road; at the next—nothing.

CHAPTER XV

THE GUILE OF SAVAGE

IN a flash the men behind stopped, too, and stood listening with straining ears. In the sudden stillness which seemed to have fallen over everything the lazy lapping of the sluggish river sounded as distinct and clear as if they stood on its very bank. Lefty found himself wondering whether Savage might not have stepped off into the water. Then, realizing the absurdity of such a thing, he felt Stillman's hand drawing him to one side of the road.

There was a chance that Savage might have heard them and was stealing back to make sure. Instinctively they both drew still farther back against some alder bushes, hoping thus to escape discovery and the consequent ruin of their plans.

At length, however, as the silence continued, it became evident that the Westerner was making no such move. He had either remained where he had first stopped, or, exercising extreme caution, he had drawn away without their having the least suspicion in which direction he had gone.

"The gink has taken to the grass," Stillman

whispered, in a chagrined tone, his lips close to the southpaw's ear. "Come ahead, slow and careful, now."

Cautiously they crept forward, making not the least sound in the thick grass that bordered the road. Savage could not have been more than thirty feet ahead of them, but when they had made that distance there was no more sight or sound of him than there had been at the beginning. A few minutes later something square and shadowy loomed indistinctly on the left—something which their exploring fingers told them presently was the rough wall of a small frame building, weatherworn, and not too solidly made.

"Boathouse, I reckon," Stillman muttered, after a momentary pause. "Thunder! If the man's gone off in a boat it certainly puts us in Dutch, my son."

"Perhaps he hasn't gone," Lefty suggested, in the same cautious whisper. "Maybe he's inside."

The words had scarcely passed his lips before a slight thud sounded from the other side of the building. It was followed by a scraping noise, then a splash which started both listeners. as if moved by the same thought, toward the nearest corner of the shack. Owing to the need for silence, no less than their ignorance of the lay of the land, it took a minute or so for them to reach a point

overlooking the river. There they stopped abruptly, peering through the thin mist that floated above the water and seemed strangely to give a vaguely luminous touch to the shadowy scene.

A small boat, vigorously propelled by a single oarsman, was slipping out of sight through the mist. After it had disappeared the rhythmical splash of the oars came clearly back to the listeners' ears.

"Thunder!" muttered the reporter. "He's going across. I wish that—"

"If there's another boat inside, we could follow him," Locke broke in suddenly. "He can't be going very far—look at the time he was back last night."

"Come on," hissed Stillman, moving swiftly along the front of the house. "Here's the door. Now, let's see if there's anything doing."

He entered hurriedly, followed by Lefty. A moment later the flash of a small pocket torch circled about the interior of the boathouse and then winked out again. The place was dingy and forlorn looking. The rotting floor was covered with dust save where a single boat had evidently rested. There was no other craft of any sort to be seen.

"Stung!" remarked Stillman briefly.

There was silence for a moment before he flashed the light on again. Lefty blinked a little

as the glare struck his eyes. His forehead was puckered thoughtfully.

"I suppose we could come down here in the daytime," he said, "and find out what sort of a place he goes to over there. There can't be so many joints within a short distance where he could get booze that it would be much of a job to pick the right one."

"It's either that or get hold of a boat and be ready to follow him some other night," the reporter returned. "Your plan would be easier. Anyhow, there's nothing doing now but to go back and tell old Jack what we've run up against. He's liable to be gone two or three hours, and I'm not going to hang around this hole all the evening for the good of a big stiff the club would be a whole lot better without. Kennedy makes me sick about this man, anyhow. Savage wouldn't last two days with any other manager."

Lefty promptly agreeing with him, they made a more thorough inspection of the shack without discovering anything helpful, then departed.

Back in the hotel, Kennedy listened to their story in noncommittal silence, but with an ominous tightening of the jaws which boded little good for the delinquent recruit. Later the manager was observed by several to take up a position in the lobby from which he could view both the main entrance and the stairs. He carried several news-

papers, and nothing could induce him to move from the place.

At nine o'clock some of the fellows, stiff and weary from the day's work, drifted to bed. Kennedy sat on. An hour later only the devotees of draw poker and one or two sleepy onlookers remained, but still the manager had not stirred. Eleven found him the sole occupant of the lobby.

The big clock over the desk indicated scarcely five minutes past the hour when a quick step sounded outside, and Savage entered. Without glancing to right or left, he walked briskly toward the stairs.

Kennedy was there ahead of him.

"Here, you!" he said sharply as he faced the busher. "What in thunder do you mean staying out to this hour? Where've you been?"

Savage flushed, and looked as if he longed to snap back, but didn't quite dare.

"I went for a walk," he retorted sullenly. "Got farther off than I thought—that's all."

"Humph!" grunted Kennedy skeptically. "A walk! It listens well!"

He stepped suddenly forward, and, catching a lapel of the busher's coat in one hand, deliberately sniffed the fellow's breath. To his surprise, he caught not the faintest odor of alcohol. He sniffed again; then, stepping back, surveyed Savage meditatively.

"Well, if you haven't been pouring it down, you've brought it back in a bottle," he said, in a tone which was almost disappointed.

Regardless of the man's angry glare, he went through his clothes with as much cool deliberation as if Savage had been a wooden dummy in a tailor shop. The search was productive of nothing whatever in the shape of flask or bottle. The busher's face wore an expression of satisfaction.

"Awful smart, ain't you?" he sneered. "Maybe you'd like me to strip so's you can be sure it ain't under my clothes."

Kennedy surveyed him coldly. "You beat it upstairs," he ordered suddenly, "and don't waste any time turning in."

Left alone, the manager followed slowly, his face perplexed. He was perfectly sure that Savage had lied to him, yet he could not prove it. The feeling that he had been tricked by this busher from the tall timbers was extremely unpalatable to old Jack, and kept him awake long after he had tumbled into bed.

It thus happened that when a thin trickle of smoke curled in at his transom he had only begun to doze off. The pungent tang of it in his nostrils brought him out of bed in a single leap. In another second, yanking open the door into the hall, he saw by the light of a flaring gas jet that the smoke came through the transom of the room

next his own—the room occupied by Nelson Savage.

Fortunately most of the locks in the old Holcombe House were not noted for any great strength. A single surging blow of the manager's wiry body sufficed to tear the screws of this one out of the tindery wood. The door burst open, letting Kennedy in with a rush.

The lights were going full blast. Still fully dressed, Savage lay across the bed, the blankets of which were smoldering briskly, giving out an ever-increasing volume of choking smoke. Scattered over the floor were several cigarette butts. Tucked under the unconscious man's arm was a quart bottle, while the fumes of alcohol arose even above the smell of burning wool.

Kennedy seemed to take in these details even as he was leaping for the washstand. A deluge from the water pitcher instantly quenched the smoldering blanket, but Savage was too far gone to do more than grunt and hug his bottle tighter. An examination of the latter revealed less than two inches of cheap liquor remaining. The busher had apparently consumed the rest, for bits of tinfoil lying about showed the bottle to have been freshly opened.

With set jaw and angry eyes, Kennedy jerked the bottle from Savage's unconscious grip, and hurled it through the open window. As he did so,

he discovered, fastened to the bureau, a length of heavy cord sufficient to reach within a few feet of the ground.

"So that was how he worked it!" muttered the older man, his eyes fixed scornfully on the figure sprawling before him. "Left the string hanging down, an' tied the bottle to it before coming in. Suffering snakes! If I didn't have to have somebody besides Lefty and that kid Temple to pitch for the boys, you'd hike back to the sticks so fast you'd hit only the high places. Anyhow, your goose is done brown. It's the can for yours the minute the old bunch shows up and get their soup bones into working order."

CHAPTER XVI

THE REGULARS ARRIVE

KENNEDY was determined to find out where the busher got his liquor. Savage's attitude next day greatly strengthened that determination. Not only did he refuse to tell anything about it, but he brazenly denied having had anything intoxicating at all. He reeled off a lot of ancient stuff about taking colic medicine, which struck the manager temporarily dumb.

Recovering, old Jack spat out some verbal vitriol which made even Savage wince. Kennedy then held confab with Jack Stillman, after which the reporter proceeded to corner the hotel proprietor, and, with his usual dexterity, painlessly extract the facts he sought. They were brief and singularly discouraging. The land across the river for almost a mile in either direction was owned by one Caspar Livermore, a well-to-do planter and horse breeder. Mr. Livermore was not only extremely penurious, but had the reputation of being a prohibitionist of the deepest dye, to whom the mere mention of intoxicants was like

a red rag to a bull. There were no other habitations of any sort save the hut of a decrepit old negro woman, reputed among the superstitiously inclined of her race to have dealings with the devil. Even that hut, which was on Livermore land, stood a good half-mile above the rotten old boathouse.

"Looks as if the old lady might bear investigating," Stillman said afterward to Locke, "though it's usually safe to be suspicious of these guys that throw a fit at the sight of a whisky advertisement. They're often the kind who lap up sixty per cent. alcohol patent medicines by the gallon. I reckon I'd better hunt up a boat, and be ready in case there's anything doing to-night."

With considerable difficulty, he managed to locate a flat-bottomed scow, which he conveyed by the sweat of his brow to a point about a quarter of a mile above the boathouse. Unfortunately, after all this labor, there was no occasion to use it that night. After dinner Savage lounged around the lobby in solitary silence for half an hour or so. At half past seven he sallied forth to one of the moving-picture shows. Lefty and Stillman were both prepared to swear that this time he not only entered the Palace Theater, but remained there until the last foot of film had been shown. That over, he returned to the hotel, and treated himself to the luxury of several wordy altercations before bedtime.

Kennedy was annoyed by their report. The desire to learn the source of the perplexing pitcher's drink supply was becoming an obsession with the manager, and he urged them to continue their sleuthing. To this both ball player and newspaper man agreed. They, too, were becoming more than vexed at the success which seemed to attend Savage's every maneuver.

Hustling back from the field that afternoon, however, every thought of the delinquent busher was driven from Lefty's brain by the sight of four men lounging in the hotel lobby. They were cleanly built, well set-up specimens, remarkable mainly for the almost miraculous fit of their very up-to-date garments, and for rather blasé manners. At the sight of Locke the latter mood vanished as if it had never been. They fell upon the southpaw as one man, slapping his back with a fond enthusiasm which fairly took his breath away.

It was the vanguard of the "regulars"—the men whose names were familiar household words the country over. It was small wonder that they carried themselves with a little air. The surprising thing was that they could fling that air aside, as they were doing now, to greet with hearty, genuine boyish delight the comrade they had not seen in months.

When the rougher preliminaries were over

tongues began to wag in chorus as Lefty was informed how the various men had passed the winter. Dirk Nelson, the steady, dependable, rather quiet backstop, had been, as usual, on his farm in Maryland.

"And don't you believe it wasn't hard to come away just when things were getting ready to sprouts," he concluded, with his slow, attractive smile. "Golly, if I'd saved up as much mazuma as old Herman Brosk, I'd sure quit the game!"

"Yes, you would!" exclaimed Rufe Hyland skeptically. Rufe looked after the Blue Stocking right field in summer, and spent his few leisure winter months in presiding as capably over a well-equipped gymnasium on Sixth Avenue. The gym was merely a diversion, however. With him baseball was the only thing worth while. "Yes, you would," he repeated—"for about one month! Then you'd be back hustling to sign on again."

"That's right," chimed in Kid Lewis, the peppery little shortstop. "It's a mighty fine thing after the post season to know you don't have to play ball for three solid months, but if you thought it was for good—suffering cats! Why, come February, when a fellow's blood begins to stir, I leave my little old two-by-four cigar store on Pennsylvania Avenue without even tellin' it good-by."

"Say, Kid," inquired Torrey, the change

catcher, curiously, "how's that business pay, anyhow? You must pull in quite a bunch of mazuma just because you're a Blue Stocking."

"Oh, I do pretty well," returned Lewis. "It ain't as if I was the real thing, like Lefty here"—he grinned, and ducked under the sweep of Locke's arm—"but there's plenty of decent fellows who are willing to buy their smokes even from an outfielder. Say, look what's coming! Whew! Some class to the old hoss, ain't there?"

The others turned to behold Laughing Larry Dalton, with his brown eyes and gay, careless smile. He was arrayed in a suit of amazing checks, sported a three-carat diamond in a startling scarf, and was preceded by a small darky staggering under the load of very new and very English-looking luggage.

"Solomon's glory!" gasped Hyland. "I thought I was some dressed, but— Say, old man, who wished it on you, anyhow?"

"Ain't he immense!" cried Lewis. "Pipe that chunk of alum weighing down his manly bosom! Can you beat it?"

"Jack's got a cub who's jest set his heart on your job, old horse," put in Nelson seriously, "and won't take no for an answer. How about it?"

"Hush!" said Lefty, with upraised hand. "You boys are pretty raw, talking like that to a real actor. Didn't you know little Larry's been

on the stage all winter? Talk about side—why, it sticks out all over him."

Dalton was quite unaffected by the comments on his personal appearance. His smile widened as he shook hands with one after another of his teammates.

"Glad you like my get-up," he drawled. "I thought these were some togs myself. Came pretty near starting a riot when I did my turn in it out at Salt Lake."

"You were the handsome, curly-haired hero, I s'pose?" said Hyland.

"Nothing like that for me!" retorted Dalton. "I was the villain. Great dope, fellows! Before I quit the show I used to get sore as a crab if I wasn't hissed enough."

Lefty was highly amused by the mental picture of the laughing-eyed, happy-go-lucky chap doing the heavy villain. By this time the lobby was filled with curious recruits pausing on their way to showers, and newspaper men who quickly joined the circle. Kennedy appeared, and shook hands in his friendly fashion, exhorting them to have "plenty of pep this year." The reporters stood about, laughing and joshing familiarly, and making mental notes for the daily wire home.

After dinner, while they were all gathered in the lobby, joking and discussing old times, two more arrivals blew in. Handsome Billy Orth

from his orange plantation in California, had picked up Joe Welsh, who owned a small cattle ranch in Arizona, and who affected rattlesnake-skin four-in-hands and hatbands.

"Back to the land of 'simmons and sore arms!" greeted Dalton. "By heck, Joe, you look kinky as the deuce! I'll bet you'll be down with a case of Charley horse inside a week. William, what do you think of this foxy shark—Locke here—sneaking down with the cubs and getting all limbered up ahead of us?"

Orth and Lewis joshed back. And so it went. There was a pleasant sense of friendliness about the whole affair which made Lefty regret the promise he and Stillman had given to keep an eye on Nels Savage.

He was not incommoded in the least by it. Savage did not leave the hotel, but spent the evening lolling about the lobby and playing pool with Pete Zacher. Locke and Stillman were puzzled enough to know what to make of such behavior, but when the third evening passed, and the fourth, and the fifth, without a single dereliction from duty on the part of the bush twirler, they began to believe that his last experience had taught him something. Then, to upset this theory, the reporter learned of several attempts that Savage had made to wheedle a drink out of one of the older men. He was just as disagreeable as he had

ever been, while his pitching, though it showed occasional brief spells of cleverness, continued to make old Jack shake his head and mutter.

"He ain't used the spitter once since he landed," the manager commented to Stillman one afternoon. Like more than one other baseball man, he did not hesitate to open his mind to this reporter, who had never once offended by sending the wrong thing to his paper. "Says he don't want to do it till he's warmed up. That may be so, or it may not, but I never yet see a spitball flinger that wasn't trying it every little while."

Two days later Kennedy announced the first five-inning practice game to take place next morning at eight-thirty between the Regulars and the Yannigans, as the recruits were called. Since their arrival the former had been warming up with even greater leisure than the youngsters. From experience they knew well how an apparently trifling strain or twisted muscle at this crucial stage was likely to develop into something serious later on.

Even the prospect of the first game left them cool and unperturbed. On the other hand, the cubs, thrilled with the notion of showing off before Kennedy, hustled around, perfecting an elaborate system of signals and indulging in various other stunts which merely emphasized their "cubbishness."

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRY-OUT OF SAVAGE

IT might have been noticed, however, that none of the old squad was late in arriving at the grounds next morning. Kennedy had announced that Gene Temple would start pitching for the Regulars, while Savage, the new twirler from the West, was to step into the box for the Yannigans.

"I'm going to give him a fair show," the manager confided to Stillman. "He ain't showed anything much in practice, and if he don't put something on exhibition to-day I reckon we'll have to hitch the can to him."

In the camp of the Regulars knives were being sharpened for Savage's scalp with a vigor which had rarely before been shown toward a recruit.

"I don't seem to have taken to Jack's latest treasure," Dalton drawled as they were making ready for the game. "It would sort of please me to spill the beans for him to-day."

"Now, I should sorrow!" said Rufe Hyland. "If little Nelsie gets his it will break my heart."

"Gent seems to be awful popular," chuckled

Pink Dillon, of the pitching staff, who, arriving at camp late, had consequently seen little of the offending Savage.

"We all love him," said Laughing Larry. "Wait till you run up against him about once, and you'll be applying for membership in this knockers' club. Now, fellows," he added, as they trotted out into the diamond, "don't forget to put in a little extra ginger to-day and blanket this sweet-tempered affair from the sagebrush. Snow him under so deep he won't ever let another peep out of him."

This was the explanation of an exhibition of peppery vim on the part of the Regulars which astonished Jack Kennedy. Usually the older and more experienced players care little for the results of these early practice games, and frequently they lose for the simple reason that they think more of their arms and legs than of piling up a score against a lot of youngsters. Later, of course, as they begin to shape up, the Yannigans find it less and less easy to accomplish anything against them; but even then the cubs' downfall is generally due to some clever bit of headwork rather than to any great physical exertion on the part of their opponents.

The Regulars had the field. From the bench Lefty watched interestedly to see how Temple would act in his first appearance with big com-

pany. He had given the youngster a bit of advice as to taking things easy, and he was pleased to observe that he followed it.

Coombs, the first man up, got a hit and reached first. The second batter flied out to Douro, the center fielder, however; and Coombs, trying to steal second, discovered to his sorrow that the cub pitcher was far from being asleep. Two more stickmen faced Temple before a hot grounder toward Larry Dalton was whipped to first ahead of the runner.

"Now, fellows, remember!" urged Dalton as they trotted in from the field. "Let's get after our amiable friend there, and show him something."

The men were quite ready to obey his injunction. Batting is one of the greatest joys of a ball player's existence. Moreover, the attitude of Nelson Savage as he strolled into the box, lips curled sneeringly, his whole manner one of careless nonchalance, as if he considered the crowd scarcely worth pitching to, was extremely aggravating.

Rufe Hyland hustled to the plate, barely able to restrain his impatience to get after the man who irritated him so. He fell with violent delight on the very first ball pitched, smashing it on a line into the field to the right of center, and reached the initial sack with ease.

Kid Lewis, who followed him, bunted nicely, sacrificing the outfielder to second, and almost making first himself. Max Douro landed on the horsehide with apparent ease, sending it out between second and short.

"All off with him," chanted Dalton from the coaching line. "Got him going already! Everybody hits him! Now, Joe, get busy and send Rufe home."

Welsh advanced confidently to the pan, and Hyland danced away from third. It was up to Savage to display his wares now or never. With a curious gleam in his eyes, Lefty glanced at Kennedy, who stood near, chewing a cigar and scowling at the Western pitcher.

The southpaw murmured to himself, "I can hear the jangle of the tin can now."

But Welsh presently fouled out back of third, and the cub shortstop made a splendid one-handed stop of a red-hot liner smashed out by Ogan, by which the downfall of the pitcher on trial was apparently merely deferred for a brief time.

The second inning was practically a repetition of the first. In the first half a cub managed to reach third, where he languished and perished. When the sides changed the Regulars proceeded to the bat with that same zest and ardor, and in a brief space bases were filled with only one out.

From the bench Lefty was watching Savage

closely, and he could not help granting the fellow a little grudging admiration. In spite of his wretched, slip-shod work; in spite of the way he was being hit all over the lot, the man's attitude of insolent condescension had not altered. His lips still curled sneeringly; he continued to regard each batter with that same slow, heavy-lidded scrutiny which was like a slap in the face. As in the beginning, his manner gave one the impression that he was going through a childish performance which bored him to death.

"He's got nerve enough for two," muttered the southpaw.

Hyland came to the bat again. Seeking to duplicate his performance of the first inning, he hit the first ball over. It was an infield fly which the second baseman easily smothered.

"To much of a rush, Rufe," chided Dalton, who had been made temporary captain of the Regulars. "Take your time. Now, Kid, you know what to do. Tap it gently on the nose, and let's have a few tallies."

Continuing to watch Savage, it seemed to Lefty as if the man's delivery had grown slower and slower. He certainly took his time in winding up, and for a man getting such poor results it seemed almost ludicrous.

His first three balls to Lewis were wide, and the batter declined to reach for any of them.

"Why the mischief don't you try the spitter?" Locke wondered to himself. "Couldn't do worse with it than you've done already. It's supposed to be your one best bet."

Savage evidently had no intention of following the unspoken advice, for he made no motion of the ball to his mouth. Slowly winding up, he lobbed one over that cut the outside corner, and Lewis, playing the game, let it pass.

"Strike!" called Pink Dillon, who was acting as umpire.

"That's right, Kid," approved Dalton. "Make him put 'em over. Make 'em be good!"

Again that maddeningly long-drawn-out wind-up; again a curve which shaved the rubber by such a narrow margin that Dillon hesitated a second before calling: "Two!"

Lewis, who had seemed on the point of swinging and then changed his mind, glared at the umpire.

"Clean your lamps, Pink!" he advised sarcastically. "They need it bad."

"Never mind that, Kid," admonished Dalton. "You'll get him this time, all right. On your toes, boys! Run on the hit!"

Lewis scooped up a handful of dirt, rubbed it over his bat handle, and faced the pitcher with a firm squaring of his jaws. He looked as if he was ready to hit anything that came within a mile of the plate, and perhaps that was what made

Savage such a long time getting into action. His movements were so deliberate and snail-like that the base runners, dodging away from the sacks in readiness for the hit, grew impatient.

"Get a move on!" called Dick Nelson from second. "Somebody put a stick of dynamite under him!"

"Just so we finish the inning in a couple of hours!" delicately hinted another.

The comments made no impression whatever on the sneering man in the box. Slowly he drew up his right arm, and leisurely cuddled the ball under his chin, his eyes fixed scornfully on the face of Kid Lewis. There was a pause which seemed eternal; then, with a whiplike motion, the arm uncurled, sending the horsehide spinning squarely across the center of the pan.

"Batter out!" cried Dillon.

His voice reflected the surprise that filled every man on the field. Lewis had not wiggled his stick. At the plump of the ball and the sound of the umpire's voice, he gave a start and a gasp. Then, whirling, he stared down at the horsehide in the catcher's mitt as if he had taken leave of his senses. An instant later, his face flaming, he turned on Dillon.

"What sort of a game do you call this?" he demanded angrily. "That ain't the right ball! The guy out there never pitched at all!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VANISHING BALL

"DON'T get sore and do the baby act," Dillon admonished. "You're out, and there's no sense howling about it."

"If you say so, I suppose it goes, Pink," sneered Lewis; "but it's a raw deal or a bum joke. You know the ball wasn't pitched. This gink catching flashed another ball, and—"

"Be a sport, Kid, for the love of Mike!" interrupted Torrey, the catcher. He had taken off his mask, and was busy adjusting the strap. "Pulling off a string of guff like that don't get you anywhere."

Lewis glared at him, and swallowed hard. He seemed about to retort when Dalton sharply ordered him to cut it out.

"That'll be about all for you, Kid," he said. "Quit holding up the game. Now, Gene, old boy, just put a little something on the ball, and show these infants what they're up against."

Lefty could not help smiling a little as he saw Lewis slouch sourly out to his place in the infield,

scowling and kicking up the dirt for all the world like a child who has been scolded.

"Too bad for anybody to take these little games seriously," he remarked to Pete Grist, beside him.

The veteran of the pitching staff absently cuddled a stiff elbow, and nodded. "That's one of Kid's failings. He certainly is there with the alibis whenever he goes wrong at bat."

The unexpected rally on the part of their pitcher heartened the cubs to such a degree that they hammered out two runs in the first half of the third, and would have made more only for a bit of swift fielding on the part of Larry Dalton.

Taking their turn at bat, the Regulars managed to force one man across the rubber before they, too, were brought up sharply by clever work in the infield.

"Some kid—that playing third," remarked Grist approvingly. "What's his name?"

"Palsifer—Tap they call him," Locke explained. "He's from the Southern League. It wouldn't surprise me if Jack was thinking of him for Daly's place.

The old pitcher nodded understandingly. Third base was one of the positions everybody felt to be weak, and throughout the remainder of the game Grist kept an eye on this promising youngster.

In the fourth inning Temple slumped distinctly, letting the Yannigans hit him right and left. Had it not been for the admirable support given him by the Regulars, the cubs would have sewed the game up in a sack then and there. As it was, the score stood three to one in their favor, a rather surprising thing, considering the efforts which were being made by the older men.

Nels Savage, on the contrary, distinctly improved. Apparently he was making no greater effort than before, and the insolent indifference of his manner continued unabated. In spite of all this, there was no question of his better form. In the last half of the fourth he struck out two men, the first of whom was Lewis, who again started to raise a protest that the ball had not been pitched. He was promptly squelched by Dalton, who was also beginning to show signs of pettishness. As Lewis passed Lefty, scowling and angry, the southpaw hailed him.

"What sort of a game is that you're trying to put over, Kid?" he bantered.

Lewis glared. "It ain't a game! It's gospel. Dillon called me out twice on a third strike when Savage hadn't made a move to deliver the ball. They put up a job on me, that's what they done. What in thunder's the matter with Pink I don't know, but—"

"Say," interrupted Locke suddenly, "you

aren't really serious? You sure can't mean to say you didn't see that ball come over?"

"Didn't see it!" repeated Lewis angrily. "How could I see it when there wasn't any to see? I tell you, the gink didn't make a move to—"

"Don't talk nutty, Kid!" admonished Grist. "Lefty and I saw it as plain as you could see the ball he just pitched to Douro. What's the sense in talking like that?"

Lewis refused to argue further. He turned and departed, leaving Locke, at least, slightly puzzled by his manner. It seemed impossible that he could really mean what he said, yet there was a convincing touch of earnestness in the heat of his temper.

Lefty and Grist were still discussing the question when Kennedy's voice sounded behind them:

"Locke, get out there and pitch the last inning. They've got Temple sweating blood, and the rest of the staff are about the worst-bunged-up lot of cripples I ever saw."

The southpaw was glad of a chance to use his arm even for a single inning. He limbered up a bit, and by the time the last Regular had flied out to the cub center fielder he was quite ready.

Trusting mainly to his support, Lefty kept down the Yannigans' score. With the arrival of the final half of the inning Locke felt a sudden desire to put his batting skill to the test of Sav-

age's pitching. Of course, what Lewis contended was absolutely absurd, but it would be interesting to see what the fellow had.

As man after man stepped to the plate and left it either for the bench or in the direction of first, Lefty's interest in the proceedings became greater. In a vague way, he felt as if he were waiting for something unusual which was presently to take place, and even when another tally was scored that feeling continued unabated.

Two men were out, and there was a runner on second. Lefty had a feeling that the batter would be put out and the game ended without his going up. It was Larry Dalton's voice urging him to hustle, rather than the crack of leather meeting wood, which brought the realization that he had not guessed right. He snatched up a bat at random, and hurried to the plate.

Seen from this particular part of the diamond, Lefty decided that the sagebrush twirler's sneering countenance was more disagreeable than even he had supposed. The uptilt of the lips, the slow, insolent, heavy-lidded glance, the dragging, maddening deliberation of movement were all emphasized; and all combined to arouse deep irritation. Locke felt a sudden desire to plant a fist on those sneering lips. With difficulty he pulled himself together, realizing with a flush of chagrin that Savage had put a strike over

"Careful, old man!" cautioned Dalton. It was Lefty's carelessness and inattention which had made that first strike possible. He would see to it that there was no more of that. He stood waiting, tense and ready, his gaze fixed keenly on the narrow slits through which gleamed the Westerner's strange, baleful eyes.

Savage's movements were very slow. A ball was put over—another, and another still. To Locke the time consumed had been so everlasting that he wondered for a moment if it wasn't four, and why he did not hear the order to take his base.

The last delivery had been so wild that it was all Torrey could do to pull the ball down. The horsehide slipped from his grasp and rolled toward the rubber, where Locke bent and picked it up. He held it for a second in his hand before snapping it out to Savage with a force which was a wordless protest against the busher's unnecessary slowness; and, great as was his abstraction, he remembered noticing along one side of the sphere a streak which was half cut, half scratch, as if the leather had scraped against a sharp stone.

If this was the method followed by Savage in regular games, he would be hooted every time he appeared on the field. The fans like snap and ginger above all else in a player. No umpire

would permit it. That everlasting stare, too, was annoying. Lefty began to wish the busher would look in another direction, if only for a moment.

Presently he looked down himself to see whether he had inadvertently stepped too far forward. Before he glanced up again the ball, whizzing over, buried itself in the catcher's mitt; and Dillon's voice, full of a most unprofessional admonition, announced:

"Two—and three!"

Flushing, Lefty straightened his shoulders and tapped the rubber with his bat. What could have induced him to be so careless he did not know. He was quite sure, though, that it wouldn't occur again.

With eyes unwavering, he waited. Every movement of the pitcher's dragging wind-up was impressed vividly on his mind. In the midst of that movement Savage seemed to pause and remain set, poised and motionless. Lefty was contemplating demanding judgment on a balk, when the unmistakable plunk of something hard smashing against the catcher's mitt made him catch his breath and whirl round.

"Batter—out!" cried Dalton. Under his breath he growled scathingly: "Oh—you—big—bonehead!"

Lefty paid no attention to this uncomplimentary remark. In fact, it is doubtful if he heard

it. He was staring unbelievingly at a soiled baseball lying in the hollow of Torrey's mitt—a ball which bore on the uppermost side a long streak—*the* ball which he had held in his hand a few minutes before!

CHAPTER XIX

A THING INCREDIBLE

IT was not strange that Lefty gasped and stared in utter amazement. The thing was uncanny—impossible! It made him feel for an instant as if something had happened to his brain—some twist or kink in the nerves of vision. In the flash of time before he got a grip on himself he felt vividly the staggering nature of such a thing happening at the crucial moment of a real game instead of a time like this, when nothing really mattered.

"Great Scott, Lefty," came suddenly from Dalton, in a decidedly peevish voice, "you're certainly a pippin, throwing away the game like that! Why didn't you come out of your trance and baste that last one? It cut the pan in halves."

Locke swung his bat carelessly in the direction of the pile, and turned to his chum, with a laugh.

"Sorry, old man," he said. "That curve fooled me, that's all."

He made no effort to lower his voice, glancing coolly at Savage, who was coming in from the box. The pitcher's eyes held a gleam of triumph

and derision, which brought a touch of color to Lefty's face, and roused in him a longing to get even with this fellow for the humiliation.

"Curve!" cried Dalton. "It was straight, and it didn't have anything on it but the cover."

The southpaw moved closer to his friend. His manner was casual and indifferent, but in his eyes was a look of earnestness which instantly caught the infielder's attention and held it.

"Nothing on it!" murmured Locke lightly. "Larry, if Savage could turn that trick at will, he'd be the greatest pitcher the world has ever seen."

He paused an instant and glanced around. Most of the players were heading toward the gate, for it was after eleven, and they were in a hurry for their shower, rubdown, and lunch. Dillon stood at a little distance, however, talking with Kennedy, while Kid Lewis was staring at the southpaw from near the bench. Catching his eye, Lefty waved him over.

"You don't understand what I mean, Larry," Lefty said, in a low tone. "Nobody could who hadn't been through the same thing. Don't ask any questions until I've talked with Kid; then I'll tell you all about it."

Without waiting for Dalton to speak, Lefty turned toward the approaching shortstop.

"Say, Kid," he asked lightly, "what's the mat-

ter with your eyes? How'd it happen you didn't swing when Savage whipped over a straight one twice for the third strike?"

The shortstop's eyes narrowed, and he scowled. "See here, Locke," he snapped, in the tone of one driven to the limit of irritability, "do I look weak in the garret? Anybody ever hint I was ready for the foolish foundry? There ain't nothing wrong with my eyes; they was examined by the best doctor in New York, and found O. K. Savage balked both times Dillon called me out. I saw him wind up and stop, glaring at me like he could chaw me up; he didn't pitch the ball either time. Torrey smacks his fist into his mitt, and then shows another ball. Then everybody tries to make me think I've been asleep. Fine work! Nice little joke! But I never thought Kennedy would stand in on anything so piffling and childish."

His jaws snapped shut over the last words like the slam of a door in a person's face; turning on his heel, he marched off across the field. As Grist had remarked that afternoon, the shortstop was prone to make excuses for poor stickwork and errors, but aside from that he was a decent, good-natured chap. Evidently the supposed trick, with its resulting banter, had worked him up to the point of exploding, Lefty's question being all that was needed to fire the fuse.

"What's it all about?" Dalton suddenly in-

quired. "Don't keep a fellow in suspenders. What's all this bunk about a game being put up on Kid? Is he crazy, or just sore?"

Lefty turned to his friend, his face serious. "It's simply this, Larry: Three times to-day—twice with Lewis, and once with me—Savage has pitched a ball the batter couldn't see."

"Couldn't see! You mean he sneaked it over?"

"Nothing of the sort. I mean, from the batter's point of view, the ball was invisible."

Dalton's jaw sagged, and he stared oddly at his friend. "You don't happen to be—in earnest, do you?" he asked, in a queer voice.

"Quite," Locke smiled faintly. "I know it sounds crazy, but it's a fact. Listen now, and I'll tell you."

When he had finished a brief, but comprehensive, account of the inexplicable incident Dalton's mouth and eyes were open to their widest extent.

"Queerest thing I ever heard tell of," he commented dazedly at last, running the fingers of one hand through his thick, curly hair. "I don't mean to doubt your word, old man, but—an invisible ball! Why, that's wilder than the worst nature fake ever doped out by a cub reporter. You haven't thought of any sane explanation of the thing, have you?"

Lefty hesitated, a slight flush creeping into his face. "I don't know whether you'd call it sane

or not," he answered slowly, feeling decidedly foolish and fully expecting his friend to burst into a roar of derisive laughter, "but it's the only one I can think of. Do you suppose he could have done it by—some sort of hypnotism?"

"Hypnotism!" exclaimed Dalton. "Why, look at the distance he was away from you! How the deuce could he pull off a stunt like that? They always have to look you square in the eyes and make a lot of motions with their hands, and all that."

"Not always. I don't know much about it except the little I've read, but it is claimed that sometimes Oriental magicians can hypnotize a whole crowd at once, and make them believe something is happening which isn't at all. Of course, Savage isn't an East Indian, but he's certainly got queer eyes that make you think he might do things like that."

"You've got me," Dalton admitted in a bewildered tone. "When you come to discussing East Indian wizards and their tricks, just count me out; I don't know anything about 'em."

He paused an instant, a smile struggling through the puzzled lines in his face. "If the same thing hadn't happened to two of you," he went on, his eyes twinkling, "I'd have laid it to a touch of biliousness. That puts a chap on the bum as quick as anything. As it is, though— Look here, Lefty,

Jack Stillman's got a head on his shoulders. He's heading this way now. You don't mind his knowing, do you?"

Locke shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I suppose not," he returned slowly. "I'm not keen about having every one know the kind of trick that was put over on me."

To tell the truth, the southpaw was humiliated by the possibility that he had been hypnotized by such a character as Nelson Savage. It was only natural, of course. No man cares to admit that he can be, even for a moment, brought under the influence of another person. There is a general conviction, which is much more widespread than true, that such succumbing is proof of a weaker intellect. It was this feeling that brought to the southpaw a sense of shame—concealed under the guise of light indifference, but none the less poignant—and made him disposed to shrink from telling even so close a friend as the newspaper man.

CHAPTER XX

THE TRAP

STILLMAN was keenly interested. "By Jove!" he exclaimed when all the details had been told. "What dope for a story! A fellow'd have to make it humorous, though; it'd never go as a serious yarn."

"Do you suppose I was—hypnotized?" Lefty asked, in a disgusted tone.

"He's got a mighty queer look about the eyes—just the expression I've seen in people who were abnormal mentally," said the reporter, somewhat evasively it seemed. "Remember whether you looked him square in the eyes when you were up at the plate?"

"Don't remember especially, but it's likely I did."

"What we want to do is to make sure how he works this trick," suggested Stillman promptly. "It may be hypnotic influence, or accident, or just plain bluff. It's up to us to get him to repeat it, and find out."

"How are you going to do that?" Dalton inquired. "He's liable to be suspicious and foxy."

"Very likely, but we'll have to work it just the same. Now, my suggestion is this: Keep the whole business under your hats, both of you. Pretend you haven't noticed anything queer at all. Some time to-night Lefty can get in conversation with Larry, and talk about what a stick he was, letting such a bum pitcher hand him a strike-out. He should do this when Savage can hear him, and he must pretend not to know the man is listening. Larry can say that everybody's rotten sometimes. Keep up that sort of thing to-morrow. Work it every chance you have to do it naturally, and I'll bet by the time batting practice is called you'll have him hooked and ready for the landing net."

"And then, when he's good and mad, you think he'll try that strike-out stunt again?" said Locke.

Stillman nodded. "Isn't it natural?" he queried. "If you work it right, and don't overdo it, he'll be in a state of temper that doesn't stop to reason. If I can only get old Jack to make him pitch for batting practice we've as good as got him. There's just one thing you want to remember: If you do get up against him, don't keep staring at his eyes. Look at anything else about him you want to, but don't give him a chance to work his little trick again, if that's how he does it."

Locke and Dalton proceeded to carry out the reporter's suggestion to the best of their ability.

They maneuvered so well that by breakfast time Savage had been reduced to a state of cold fury without in the least realizing how completely he was falling into the trap.

Stillman attached himself to the person of the manager immediately on leaving the hotel that morning. The newspaper man had a way of inducing old Jack to do things, whenever he wished them done, by throwing out hints; and he now proceeded to throw in his best and most effective form.

That his efforts were not wasted was proven when Kennedy ordered Savage to the mound to pitch for batting practice some fifteen minutes after the field was reached.

"Every man run out his hit, and no loafing," said the Chief.

Watching Savage, the reporter saw him pass behind Locke and Dalton on his way to the mound, pause for a second irresolutely, with an angry snarl of the lips and swift clenching of his fists, and then move on again. A moment later Kennedy touched the scribe on the arm.

"Step out here with me, Stillman," the manager said. "I want to give you the chance you were anxious for to watch Savage work at short range."

"I'll be there like a passenger train." The newspaper man's tone was enthusiastic. "Just

one second till I get my camera. I left it over on the bench."

Sprinting over, he snatched up the camera and turned back. Halfway he encountered Locke, and slowed down.

"Get in as soon as you can," he whispered. "Don't forget about his eyes; string him along a little."

Without waiting for a reply, he loped out upon the diamond, and took his place beside Kennedy, who was acting as umpire. It did not take Stillman long to discover that Savage had lost some of the cool, insolent indifference of the day before. It was evident that he strove to affect the pose, but every now and then, in movements or gestures, there escaped a hint of the real nature beneath the shell of make-believe—a hot intolerance, made worse by the rasping his temper had undergone at the hands of Locke and Dalton.

The reporter studied him with an interest quite unfeigned, hoping the while that Lefty would not too long delay his appearance at the plate. If signs meant anything, the busher was ripe for the experiment. It needed little or nothing to send him off. Seeing Lefty standing ready to succeed Hyland at the rubber, Stillman suddenly resolved to give a last effective push.

"Well, Locke's up," he remarked, in a low tone,

as Hyland clouted the ball and began to lumber heavily around the base lines.

"He wasn't very strong with the willow yesterday," reminded Kennedy.

The reporter laughed. "That was an accident. There isn't one of the old guard, let alone a cub, who can keep Lefty Locke from hitting the ball somewhere into the diamond when he wants to."

He spoke just loud enough for Savage to hear, and was rewarded by a stiffening of the busher's whole frame. From that moment Stillman was oblivious to everything about him save the drama which had for its limited stage the narrow stretch between the pitcher's mound and the plate.

He saw that the southpaw was following his injunction not to look at Savage's eyes. He guessed, too, from the latter's attitude, no less than from the sudden slackening of his movements, that the pitcher was trying to force Lefty into doing the thing he had been warned against.

To Stillman the affair had suddenly become infinitely more absorbing than he had expected. It seemed to have developed all at once into a tremendous struggle between two wills. His glance flashed from Lefty's face to the back of the fellow in front of him. The thick, muscular neck, the very pose of the head, sunk low upon those powerful shoulders, and inclined slightly forward,

combined inexplicably to give the reporter a strange feeling that perhaps in Savage dwelt an evil spirit which grew stronger with every victory, as vampires are said to increase in power and malignity with each new victim.

Common sense told him that it was absurd. This was the twentieth century, with evil spirits and magicians relegated to the dim and distant past. But, though he tried his best to thrust the silly notion from his mind, he found himself wishing for the power to throw his influence on Lefty's side of the balance.

Savage's first delivery was wide; it seemed to Stillman as if the fellow had purposely made it so. The second was also a ball. When the third missed a corner of the pan by at least six inches the reporter decided that the man on the mound was following a regular system which he held to on such occasions as this. He noticed also that the pitcher's movements became slower and slower with each delivery. As far as Stillman could tell, his eyes never left the batter's face.

When at last Savage completed his tedious wind-up, and pitched, the newspaper man fairly held his breath, though in reality he was quite sure what Lefty would do. The ball was a fair drop, with considerable speed. Locke missed it by several inches.

"A bluff, of course," Stillman muttered to him-

self. "He's playing his part of the game to force Savage to the limit."

And yet, as he waited for that interminable wind-up to end, the reporter was not quite so confident. What if Lefty should forget instructions and let the busher get in his fine work, after all? It would be more than humiliating—it would be disastrous. A man who could break up such a cool character as Lefty Locke would be dangerous even on his own team—a menace on any other.

Glancing anxiously at the southpaw, Stillman was just in time to see his friend's eyes shift in a sudden peculiar manner. The movement had in it every appearance of intense effort, and was accompanied by a queer, dazed shaking of the head. Before he could recover himself, apparently, the ball whizzed over the center of the pan.

"Strike!" called Kennedy; and, in a lower tone, to Stillman: "Anybody who can fan Lefty Locke twice running is going to bother the rest of the crowd, believe me!"

"Wait!" retorted Stillman. "He hasn't fanned—yet."

It was far from easy to assume that air of confidence. Lefty had evidently, through carelessness or bravado, disobeyed orders. His eyes were fixed, and there was something decidedly mechanical in the way he swung his bat gently back and forth.

Stillman frowned. That odd sense of an evil influence radiating from the man before him returned with added strength and conviction. He found himself at one moment mentally raging at the fellow's slowness; at another he feared Savage would pitch too soon. His eyes never left the southpaw's face, and the longer he stared the more certain he became that his friend was again under Savage's control.

Suddenly the busher's arm shot forward. Stillman caught his breath in a sharp intake. The progress of the ball seemed as slow and dragging as a defective motion-picture reel running at quarter speed. Apparently Lefty had not moved a muscle. He stood with that same staring, vacant expression on his face, as if utterly oblivious for the moment to everything that was happening about him. Stillman groaned aloud; then—

There was a ringing crack as Lefty swung at precisely the right moment to meet the sphere when it floated over the center of the pan. Out into the field to the right of deep center soared the horsehide.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST STRAW

STILLMAN recovered from his surprise just in time to observe the brief, fierce spasm of rage which seized Savage. He had partly turned, and stood, hands clenched and muscles tense, staring at Locke, running down the base line. There was stamped on the rough-hewn profile a look of mingled astonishment and bitter hate which made even the hardened newspaper man feel a little tingle along his spine.

For a fraction of a minute the baffled pitcher stood motionless. Then, with machinelike precision, he wheeled full around, deftly caught the ball lined in by one of the youthful volunteer fielders, and faced the next batter without having uttered a word.

"By Jove!" murmured the reporter under his breath. "He's sure got it in for Lefty."

Stillman cut away from Kennedy as soon as he could after batting practice was over, and made for the spot where Lefty was preparing to limber up his arm over by the stand.

"You certainly need a good tanning, you big bluff!" he said as he came up.

The southpaw grinned. "Pretty good, wasn't I?"

"Too good! You had me all up in the air, thinking it was real."

"You don't mean to tell me that glassy-eye stuff took you in when you knew what was doing?"

"We didn't rehearse that part," explained the reporter, "so I wasn't expecting it. Besides, it would be just like your crazy ways to chance doing what I told you not to, just to see what would happen."

Locke's smile widened and took on a touch of chagrin. "That's just what I did do—and, say, that gentleman has got some hypnotic eye, believe me! He was working it overtime to-day, too. If I hadn't looked away when I did there'd been nothing doing for mine."

"Then I did guess right? He was trying to work it again to-day?"

"Trying his best. Say, did you see his face when he discovered how I'd been stringing him along? Some temper there, eh?"

"You bet!" The reporter's tone was emphatic. "You want to keep an eye on him, old man. I don't believe he's got a scruple to his name."

"Don't worry," put in Locke. "He's had a thrashing coming for some time, and I'm willing

to be the one to hand it to him. Well, now we've found out about this, what are we going to do?"

This seemingly simple question proved difficult to answer. In setting the little trap for Savage, the two friends had been animated altogether by a desire for personal information. They had sought to know what it was that enabled the busher to perform those almost uncanny feats. And now, having found out, they were rather at a loss as to what to do with their information.

Satisfied though they might be regarding the nature of the man's remarkable power, they were unwilling to place themselves open to the ridicule and disbelief with which ninety-nine persons out of a hundred would greet such a story.

After dinner, Lefty, Stillman, and Larry Dalton retired to a corner of the lobby to discuss this question. Their arguments were warm and lengthy, and for the better part of the evening they remained oblivious to much of what was going on about them. They finally decided to hold off any action until the power on other players of this surprising talent of the bush pitcher had been tested further. Then Kennedy appeared before them, his face far from amiable.

"Any idea where that sweet-scented geranium, Savage, has taken himself?" he inquired.

"Might be playing pool," Dalton suggested. "I saw him go in there with Ogan after dinner."

Kennedy shook his head. "He ain't. Charley, the marker, says he finished his game and came out over an hour ago."

"Want us to take a look around for him?" inquired Lefty, with no great show of enthusiasm. A glance at the clock had shown him the hour hand close to eleven, and the discovery seemed to bring on a sudden yearning for bed.

"No!" was the almost snappy retort. "The common scruff's off tanking up again, I reckon. If he is"—the lean jaws tightened, and the dark eyes snapped ominously—"it's going to be the last time. You boys better hit the straw. Look at the hour."

He turned on his heel and walked away, apparently heedless of whether his advice was taken or not. Tramping upstairs, he turned into the room next his own, and walked straight over to one of the windows looking out on the side of the hotel. His exploring fingers encountered a stout cord hanging limply over the sill.

"The cheap, low-down tank!" he growled. "This is the end of him. I've coddled him along all I'm going to. I don't give a hang whether I'm shy on working pitchers or not. I'll tie the can on him to-morrow, an' if every decent manager I know don't hear the jangle of it I'll certainly be some surprised."

CHAPTER XXII

SAVAGE'S DISAPPEARANCE

WITH his mind finally made up to a step he had really wanted to take for days past, Jack Kennedy arose with extreme promptitude next morning, and dressed briskly. Having made his toilet, he stepped into the hall and knocked loudly on the door next his own. There was no response, but this did not surprise the manager.

"Sleeping it off, I reckon," he muttered as he turned the knob and entered without ceremony. "Well, it'll be the last time he—"

There was an abrupt pause, followed by a grunt of surprise, as the manager stopped in the middle of the room and stared about him. Except for himself, the place was empty. The bed was smooth and untouched. Even the string still hung limply over the window sill. Evidently Savage had not returned at all.

"Out all night!" exclaimed the manager. "Or has he gone for good?"

Frowning, he walked over to the window and glowered into space for a minute or two. It was

a shock and a disappointment to have the fellow sneak off this way without giving the manager a chance to let loose some of the verbal vitriol that had been corked up in him for so long.

"He can't be gone for good," Jack said aloud, "with all his stuff lying around like this. He'll be back, and then—"

The pause was more eloquent than words. The manager turned to leave the room, when suddenly the door was thrown violently open, and Al Ogan burst in.

"You common scrub!" he exclaimed furiously. "Where's my— O-h!" His jaw sagged, and he stared amazedly at Kennedy. "I thought you were Savage. Where is he?"

Old Jack shook his head. "Give it up. I was asking myself that question not half a minute ago. What seems to be your trouble?"

"Trouble!" Ogan snapped out the word in a tone of extreme anger. "The cheap skate stole my watch!"

"What!" Kennedy's voice was sharply incredulous. "You can't mean that, Ogan. Savage has certainly got brains enough not to pull off a stunt of that sort."

"Has he? Well, he don't use 'em, then! The watch was swiped last night in the billiard room, and he's the only one who could have taken it."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"It's as plain as print. We were playing pool right after dinner—the only ones in the room. My coat and vest were in a chair back of the table. When Savage asked for a match I told him to help himself from the box in my side coat pocket. I was making a hard shot at the time, and my back was turned. When I came to look for the watch this morning, it was gone."

Kennedy frowned. "How was it you didn't notice the loss last night?" he inquired, with some tartness. "You don't know but somebody went through your clothes while you were asleep."

"And left a roll of bills in my trousers pocket?" countered Ogan sarcastically. "I guess nit! Generally I take my watch out and leave it on the bureau, but last night we were late, and I just dumped the clothes on the chair and tumbled in. Since Lefty bunked with Dalton, I've had the room to myself, and I have a habit of locking the door. There's no getting around it, Jack, Savage is a thief, and I'm hanged if I let him walk off with something I think as much of as I do that watch. Haven't you any idea where he's gone?"

A sudden spasm of disgust assailed Kennedy, making him wish fervently that he had never set eyes on the aggravating individual who had disturbed his equanimity more than any recruit he had ever handled.

"Not a ghost of one," he answered. "I'm done

with him. He can be in the infernal regions for all I care, just so he stays away from me."

He strode past Ogan to the door; there, pausing abruptly, as if ashamed of his outburst, he glanced back over his shoulder.

"Go see Locke," he advised gruffly. "He thinks he's got a hunch where Savage gets his booze. I'll let him off this morning to take you there if he wants to. But don't mention that man's name to me again."

He stamped out into the hall.

"Old man's temper is certainly riz up," Al commented. "Wonder what else this crook has been doing to put himself in bad?"

He wasted little time on that question, however. Descending to the dining room, he bolted his breakfast, and sought out Lefty Locke.

"Sure, I'll go!" the latter agreed, when he had listened to Ogan's recital. "Can't promise to help you much, but I'll do my best. Jack Stillman and I have only the vaguest sort of an idea that he gets his booze at a certain farmhouse across the river; we really don't know a thing for sure. I'll be right with you."

Knowing that the reporter would be busy with his daily column for the *Star*, Lefty made no attempt to hunt him up. Securing his hat, he joined Ogan at the door, and together they started briskly for the river road.

They had scarcely fallen into step before there flashed suddenly into the southpaw's mind a remembrance of that perplexing night of over a week before and the problem of the voice in the dark which he had never really solved. It was rather curious that these latest developments should again couple Savage and Al Ogan together. Locke wondered whether it might not be something more than mere coincidence. He became swiftly determined to find out, if finding out lay within his power.

"It's funny, Al," he remarked in a rather careless tone, "but I had an idea you and Savage knew each other pretty well."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CATASTROPHE

OGAN turned and stared at Lefty with an air of questioning which was either real or remarkably well assumed. "Know Savage well?" he said. "What gave you that notion?"

The pitcher shrugged his shoulders. "Reckon it must have been that night a week or so ago when you came into the hotel with him about ten. You certainly acted mighty chummy then."

"Chummy!" was the puzzled exclamation. "Why, I've never— Oh—that night, you mean? I remember now." He hesitated an instant, and glanced suddenly away with an affectation of carelessness which did not deceive his companion. "I reckon that must have been the first time I ever spoke to the man," he went on. "I ran into him by accident, not a block away from the hotel."

Lefty's eyebrows went up. "And yet," he drawled, "you'd left that poker game and hustled out over an hour before."

"I went for a walk," Ogan explained hastily, without looking at the southpaw. "I— Say,

what the deuce is this, anyhow—an inquisition?" The color flamed into his face, and he flung back his head to stare resentfully at Locke. "You talk as if you thought I wasn't telling the truth. You —look that way, too."

"Hardly that." The pitcher's tone continued lightly casual. "I did have an idea, though, that you weren't telling me everything. You see, Al, it wasn't just idle curiosity that made me ask."

For a second or two longer Ogan's resentful expression remained unchanged. Then his eyes softened a little; his lids drooped.

"Sort of crabby, wasn't I?" he inquired. "Guilty conscience always does make a fellow sore. You see, I was ashamed to tell anybody about that note of Tap—"

"Tap!" put in Lefty, in astonishment. "Did Tap Palsifer send you that note?"

"Sure! Who'd you think did? Tap knew about the trouble I had last season, but he didn't want to come right in and break up the game, so he found a boy to take in a note he'd written to—"

"You've got me, Al," interrupted Lefty, with a shake of the head. "Reckon I've been barking up the wrong tree. I don't understand a single word you've said. Don't go ahead if it's something you'd rather not tell me."

"It isn't—now I've made the break," the in-

fielder returned, after the briefest of pauses. "I'd like you to know, and then you can give me a hand in case I tumble another time. It's cards, generally. I can't seem to use 'em in moderation. Last year I played so much it put me to the bad on the diamond, and I had to cut it out altogether. I had no business to sit in the game the other night, but I thought it might be different this year. Tap was wiser than I, though. The old hankering was there worse than ever. I had the time of my life pulling out, but I managed to somehow; and when I got outside didn't he give me a roasting—and then some! Well, we went for a stroll and, on the way back, ran into Savage. Tap stopped to get some cigarettes; Savage and I came on together. He wasn't half bad that night. I didn't know then what he was."

Lefty drew a long breath, and smiled. It was impossible to doubt the truth of Ogan's explanation. The man's eyes were clear and candid; his gaze unwavering. So it was Temple, after all, that he had overheard—Temple, the seemingly open, wholly attractive youngster Locke himself had been the means of bringing into the Blue Stocking squad.

His interest in the puzzle reawakened surprisingly by this discovery, Lefty promised himself a speedy interview with the young Seaboard recruit, and made haste to apologize to Ogan for the man-

ner in which he had bungled. Fortunately the infielder took it all in good part, and the southpaw forestalled any awkward questions by branching off into an account of the little Stillman and himself had learned of Savage's mysterious trips across the river. By the time he had finished, the boathouse was in sight.

Pausing only long enough to see that the boat was gone, Locke led the way upstream to where Stillman's worm-eaten old flat-bottomed scow had been hidden in the bushes.

"Though why he was so careful about it I don't know," Lefty commented as they hauled it out and shoved it into the water. "I can't imagine anybody taking it as a gift, much less stealing it."

Placing Ogan in the stern, Locke took the oars, and headed for a slight cove in the farther bank, which looked at that distance like the mouth of a small creek or inlet.

The river was wide, and from the shore it had a sluggish appearance, which Lefty soon discovered to be deceptive. He had not progressed a dozen yards before he felt the strong tug of the current, and presently it was all he could do to keep the bow from being turned downstream.

"Better let me take an oar," Ogan suggested. "You don't want to strain your arm."

"Don't worry about me," returned the southpaw. "Keep an eye peeled for logs coming

downstream. These spring freshets always flood out a lot of 'em, and they're hard to see in this muddy water."

The infielder nodded, and at once directed his gaze upstream.

There was a pause in midstream to let a water-soaked, low-floating log shoot past, while two minutes later the oarsman had to pull furiously to escape being struck amidships by another. There was a lot more, both of hard work and excitement, in the little jaunt than he had anticipated. It would be aggravating if nothing came of it.

At last, after what seemed an eternity of strenuous labor, the strength of that midstream current began to lessen. Locke bent to his oars, sending the boat through the water at comparatively good speed. It seemed to him that not more than a few seconds could have passed before he saw Ogan raise himself suddenly in the stern.

"Hard on your right—quick!" he shouted. "There's a snag—"

The words died on his lips as he dropped back on the seat, clutching instinctively at the sides. The southpaw put forth every ounce of strength he possessed in a strenuous attempt to pull the boat around. Before the clumsy scow had even begun to respond to his efforts, there was a thud, a crash; the boat rose up as on the crest of a wave, quivered, then dipped sidewise, coming to rest at

a weird angle. And there it hung precariously, its strained, rotting frame shaking and trembling continuously with the force of the strong current rushing against the exposed bottom.

With the sudden shock of collision Lefty had lost an oar. Now, bracing himself with one foot against the lower side of the boat, and stretching a helping hand to his companion, he carelessly relinquished the other, which was carried away by the water.

Ogan lost not an instant in pulling himself up beside Locke. He was drenched to the waist, for the stern seat had been thrust under water when a knotty spur of the snag tore a hole in the rotten planking just back of the bow. For a minute they clung to the frail, shaking timber in silence, staring across the hundred feet or so of troubled, muddy water between them and the shore. Then the southpaw suddenly burst into a laugh.

"'Jove!" he cried. "If Savage could see us now, he'd say the joke was on us."

The infielder's responsive chuckle was prompt, but seemed somewhat lacking in spontaneity.

"I'm glad he isn't around!" he returned. "Say, old man, how the mischief are we going to get out of this? The old tub's likely to break up any minute."

"That's no lie!" Locke had relinquished his hold on the seat, and was tugging at the laces of his

dripping shoes. "There's nothing else but to lighten cargo a bit and swim for it."

"That's the bad part of it." Ogan spoke slowly, in the tone of one who is striving hard to suppress every hint of emotion. "I—can't swim."

The southpaw's nimble fingers abruptly ceased picking at the sodden laces; his head came up with a jerk. His gaze rested for a second lightly on his friend's face, then flashed past the baseman's broad shoulder to linger appraisingly on the sweep of smoothly sliding brown water that had suddenly widened so miraculously. In his expression there was no hint of the momentary contraction of the throat muscles, or the brief anxious chill which lingered for a second on his spine as he realized the meaning of that terse announcement. When he spoke, his voice was level and untroubled.

"That so?" he queried coolly, breaking one of the laces with a snap, and dragging off a shoe. "I'll have to swim for two, then, won't I? Don't lose any time shedding your coat and shoes, old fellow. They're a nuisance in the water."

Ogan proceeded to obey instructions as quickly as he could. His face was, perhaps, a shade less brown, but his lips were firm, and there was not even a tremor in the fingers that did their work without fumbling. His own feelings gave Lefty a good idea of what must lie beneath that mask of

nonchalance. The fellow was grit clear through, he thought admiringly, as he slipped out of his coat and let the garment drop carelessly into the stream.

"Grab hold of me to steady yourself," he advised quietly when Ogan began to wriggle out of coat and vest. "Loosen up your shirt, too. I reckon that's about all you'll have time to do."

The southpaw's own thin silk shirt was open at the throat. Under his stockinged feet he felt the planks bend and quiver like that absurd moving floor in one of Coney Island's side shows. The wreck could scarcely hold together many minutes longer, yet he waited with cool patience until the infielder was quite ready.

"There!" he said at last as the striped vest was whirled out of sight by the current. "Now, listen. We'll slide over this side together, and do it as easy as we can. When we're in the water you don't want to worry. Lie perfectly still, with one hand on my shoulder, and let me do the rest. You can catch hold of my shirt, but don't lose your head and grab me around the neck. Get me?"

"Sure!" Ogan's lips were pressed tightly together, a straight gray line. His eyes were wide, almost purple, but unwavering. "But if I should be a fool, you—hand me one."

Locke smiled briefly, reassuringly. "You're not going to be a fool. Come ahead now. Take it

easy. We don't want the old tub to split up—Hold up a second! I'll be hanged—"

With a splintering crash, the great bulk of a submerged log, swept down by the rushing current, struck the wrecked boat squarely. Flung violently against the one remaining oarlock, Lefty caught a momentary glimpse of Ogan's body hurled past him into the brown torrent. The planks under his feet seemed to melt away like ice in boiling oil. In another instant the muddy water met over his head, blotting out everything.

CHAPTER XXIV

DIRE PERIL

WITH the instinct of a skilled swimmer, Lefty had drawn in a deep lungful of air before he went under. It was that same instinct which, on rising to the surface, made him thrust vigorously with arms and legs toward the place where he had last seen Ogan. He was not in the least troubled about himself. A moderately good swimmer, keeping his head, would have no difficulty in reaching shore; and Lefty was more than that. But the infielder probably would thrash about and struggle fiercely, only to hasten the inevitable.

As his head shot up into the sunlight the southpaw brushed a straggling lock of hair from his eyes, and stared eagerly downstream. Not a dozen feet away the muddy water was suddenly cleft by a clutching hand, followed swiftly by the distorted face of Al Ogan, eyes staring, mouth gasping widely for precious air.

With a powerful lunge, Lefty flung himself forward. A few strokes brought him beside the

struggling man just in time to slide a firm hand under his chin.

"Steady, Al!" he cried. "Take it easy, old man. You're all right now."

He scarcely expected to be obeyed, and he was not. Ogan was in the grip of that paroxysm of madness which comes to every drowning person. He knew only that out of the awful, despairing waste of instability had come something solid, something which kept his mouth for a moment above the loathsome, lapping, suffocating water. His impulse was to grasp it, and grasp it he did with a surprising swiftness which caught Lefty, looking though he was for such a move, off his guard.

Remembrance of the few succeeding minutes was never very clear to Locke. The instant Ogan's fingers closed over his wrist in the iron grip of despair he knew his work was cut out for him. He recalled jerking away with all his strength, and of going under in the process. When he finally came to the surface with lungs fairly bursting, Ogan was nowhere to be seen. Pausing only long enough to draw a deep breath, the southpaw dived.

In diving he had nothing whatever to guide him, and it was sheer luck that brought his outstretched hands against the body of the man he sought. This time there seemed no movement. Ogan had evidently lapsed into unconsciousness, and, catching

him under the shoulders with one arm, Lefty struck out for the surface.

He was beginning to grow exhausted from so much struggling. He was assailed by grave doubts of his ability to get Ogan ashore. Then, to his horror, just as they shot up into the blessed air, the limp infielder turned unexpectedly in his arms, and fastened clutching fingers about his throat.

The southpaw tore away the gripping hands, and took an uncertain stroke or two out of reach. Almost as quickly he was back again. His head reeled dizzily, and he could scarcely see, but to let his friend sink was a thing impossible. Reaching out, he caught Ogan by the hair. Then a sobbing breath of thankfulness passed his lips as he saw a strange boat that was almost upon them.

It came swiftly on the current, threatening to run down the two struggling in the water. Then it swerved, its progress was stayed perceptibly, and a figure suddenly bent over the side, with arms outstretched. Lefty was too much occupied with the now almost senseless Ogan to glance at the stranger's face. He held the infielder up in the water until a pair of strong hands slid under the limp arms and began to drag the dripping body into the boat. Then the pitcher reached for the moving craft himself, caught the side near the

stern, and clung there, too weak to pull himself into the boat unaided.

A moment later a shadow blotted the sun from Lefty's eyes. Glancing up, he found himself staring into the face of Nelson Savage.

For a moment the southpaw had a weird feeling that he was seeing visions. That the busher should be here was natural enough, but to find him doing what this man had done seemed incredible. Then, as the fellow dropped to his knees on the stern seat and reached out a helping hand, Locke realized that the impossible was happening.

"Give us your fist," the Westerner said briefly.

There was a straining of muscles in which Locke rendered what help he could, and a moment later the pitcher was in the boat, staring dazedly and still a little incredulously at the face of his rescuer.

"All right?" the latter questioned, stepping back to secure one of the oars which was balanced precariously over the side.

Savage's heavy brows met in a single straight line above the bridge of his rather large nose, and there was an undercurrent of suppressed anxiety in his voice, and an inflection which faintly stirred a chord of memory in the southpaw's mind.

"Sure!" Lefty answered mechanically, his eyes

still searching the other's face. "Only a little winded, that's all."

A second later he forgot everything else in the remembrance of Ogan's condition. The infielder sprawled in the bottom of the boat, his eyes closed. Without a word, Savage and Locke straightened him as best they could, and began to work his arms vigorously. To their intense relief, he responded almost at once; he was not unconscious, but utterly exhausted. As soon as he realized this, Locke suggested that they make for shore at once.

Savage agreed, and, each taking an oar, they headed for the bank from which Lefty and Ogan had started, without trying to pull back to the boathouse.

It was a curious, silent row. Neither man spoke, for, in truth, they needed all their wind for the physical exertion of cutting across the current. But all the time Lefty's mind was busy trying to figure out the subtle, but unmistakable, change which had come over the chap beside him. He could not imagine the Savage of yesterday and the day before acting as this man had done. He might, perhaps, have come to the rescue of two drowning men, but certainly he would never have shown any anxiety for their welfare once they had been dragged from the water. There were other things, too, slight, but equally puzzling; but

it was not until they had reached the bank and lifted the still helpless Ogan from the boat that the remembrance he had been striving for came to Lefty in a flash.

That unpleasant, baleful glare had vanished from Savage's eyes. They were human now, almost attractive and winning—the eyes of the man he had met and unaccountably liked at the station in that little, far-away Jersey village of Belle View.

CHAPTER XXV

TWO IN ONE

THE realization had scarcely flashed into Locke's mind when Ogan, who had dropped weakly down against a sapling, slowly lifted his head from his lax arms, and stared fixedly at Savage. His expression was dazed, as one just awakening from a dream to realities which he could not understand. Then swiftly the puckered, puzzled wrinkles in his forehead changed to deep, vertical furrows.

"You!" he said sharply; then: "Well, where's my watch?"

Savage's eyes widened a trifle. "Your watch!" he repeated. "I don't remember seeing it."

The infielder made an impatient gesture with his hands. "Don't try that game!" he snapped. "You saw it well enough last night in the billiard room. What's more, you managed to slip it from my pocket into yours."

Even though Ogan was probably still too dazed to realize what he was doing, the bad taste of entering into a discussion of the robbery at such a moment brought a flush of embarrassment to

Lefty's face. His lips were parted in a swift impulse to silence his teammate, when a glance at Savage stilled the words abruptly.

The busher had straightened almost imperceptibly; his face took on the keen wariness of one suddenly on his guard. It was gone in a second, leaving only the faintest added touch of color and a slight lowering of the lids; but it was enough to reduce Locke to wondering silence.

"You've made a mistake," Savage returned, with chill brevity. "I know nothing whatever about any property of yours."

"You don't!" sneered Ogan. He rose unsteadily to his feet, and faced the quiet, square-jawed man before him. "I s'pose you'll be saying next that you weren't shooting pool with me last night?"

Savage's lids drooped even lower. His hands were clenched so tightly that the knuckles showed white against the brown skin. He had not stirred, but to Locke he suddenly gave the impression of tremendous dynamic force, quiescent, but likely at any moment to leap forth in strenuous action.

"Because I played pool with you," the Westerner returned, in that same cold, deliberately restrained tone, "it hardly follows that I am responsible for the disappearance of your valuables. I happen to own a very good watch already, and really have no use for two."

"I didn't suppose you'd wear it!" retorted Ogan hotly. "Such things are easy enough to dispose of, as you probably—"

"Al," interrupted Lefty indignantly, "cut it out! Can't you understand that but for Savage we'd both of us, probably, be at the bottom of the river? He's the one who pulled us out."

The infielder's jaw sagged, and for a time he stared at his friend, a crimson tide surging into his face. His gaze shifted to the busher. His lips quivered a little and parted, as if he meant to speak, but closed again as he turned his back and moved uncertainly toward the near-by roadway.

"You mustn't mind, Savage," Locke said, in a low tone. "He's been worrying a lot about losing a watch his father gave him, and he really isn't himself at all. Suppose we go on back to the hotel? I'm beginning to feel as if some dry clothes would be acceptable."

The other pitcher nodded, and they started after Ogan. At first there was a rather awkward pause, but, overtaking the infielder, his very silence seemed to throw the other two together, and before they knew it they were conversing on various topics relating to the training camp and the forthcoming baseball season.

Lefty was talking with a purpose. An idea had come into his mind—a strange, fantastic, almost

uncanny idea, which, if he could find any reason for it, would explain a good many of Nelson Savage's apparently inexplicable traits. By the time they reached the hotel he had accepted his solution of the problem, weird as it might seem. Ogan hurried on ahead of them, apparently eager to escape from an embarrassing situation. He was passing the desk when Major Holcombe, the proprietor, halted him.

"Mistah Ogan," said the major, in his slow, courtly, Southern manner, "one moment if yo' please, suh." He came forward from behind the desk, one hand extended. "I think this is yoah property. It seems to be marked with yoah initials. I regret most sincerely the unfawtunate situation, suh, but I have discov'ed a man in my employ—the boy Charlie, who has taken cha'ge of the billiard room—guilty of theft, suh, and this was found on his pusson."

For a long moment Ogan stared at the watch which had been laid in his mechanically outstretched hand. Then he raised his eyes to Savage's. In them there was contrition, embarrassment, and regret. It was not easy to speak. He moistened his lips, and at last the words came haltingly:

"I beg your pardon, Savage. I seem to have made a big—mistake. I hope you'll forgive me."

There was no hesitation in the busher's acknowledgment of the apology. He took the other's outstretched hand promptly.

"Don't worry about that, Al," he said quickly. "We're all of us likely to go wrong now and then. Forget it!"

Mumbling something indistinguishable, Ogan hurried toward the stairs, and disappeared, leaving the other two to follow more slowly. In the second-floor corridor Lefty paused an instant beside Savage's door.

"Well, I'll go on and get into something dry," he said. "See you later, old chap."

Savage nodded and entered his room. The southpaw continued on down the hall alone. While dressing Lefty turned over and over in his mind the curious idea that had come to him. It was almost absurd, yet what other explanation could make apparent impossibilities dovetail so accurately? Starting downstairs, he found that it was almost noon, and was not surprised to encounter Jack Kennedy in the lobby below.

"Well," queried the manager briefly, "did you find the man you went after?"

Hesitating, Locke glanced swiftly around. The players were appearing by twos and threes at the main entrance. He drew Kennedy across the room, pausing beside the door of the stuffy little writing room.

"We did," he returned quietly. "And, Jack, I want you to do something for me."

The manager stared, then frowned. "Look here, Lefty," he exploded, "don't tell me you want a favor for that sneak!"

"But I do. Wait! Just let me tell you what he's done for me."

Briefly, but with vivid clearness, he told what had transpired on the river that morning. Kennedy remained unmoved.

"Very nice!" he conceded. "But where do I come off—holding on to a creature who gets skated every time he can beg, borrow, or steal drink? I'm not running the Blue Stockings for my health, you know. I've got to show results. I've got to make every man count, and how am I going to do that if I keep no-goods like this Savage? Why, son, he isn't worth his board. Not only has he tippled ever since he struck camp, and sassed me till I'm ready to mash his homely mug in, but he's got the kind of disposition that would set a whole team scrapping—and you know what that means."

Locke reached forward impulsively and laid a restraining hand on Kennedy's arm. "Listen to me, Jack," he said quickly. "I want to ask you something. Did you ever read a book called 'Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'?"

The manager's eyebrows went up, and he

sniffed. "About that fool who took powders and changed himself into a bum?" he inquired.

"Well, that's the way the story has it, but Stevenson didn't mean it quite so literally. What he had in mind was a case of dual personality. You know that every one of us has good impulses and bad. In some people these impulses are strengthened to personalities which are constantly at war. Sometimes the good nature is uppermost, sometimes the bad. It's a constant fight for control of the body, and the one that is strongest ultimately wins out."

His eyes were very bright; his whole face indicated his earnestness. "That's Savage's case," he went on emphatically. "I'm positive of it. I've told you what sort he was when I first met him that day on the train. When I ran into him at Belle View, he was utterly different; he was human and civilized. He'd lost that beastly look about the eyes; the better nature was uppermost. Down here he had changed again; the other self held control, and you know what that was. It got my goat. I didn't know what to make of it. But to-day when I found him changed again I remembered the story. I remembered a play I saw last winter which had that very subject for its plot, and which was founded on fact. There have been such cases—a number of them—and I'll bet you any money, Jack, that Savage's is one of them."

In spite of the talk and laughter of a group over by the desk, that corner of the room seemed very still. Kennedy, incredulous and skeptical, leaned against the back of a worn leather chair.

"And you believe all that?" he asked at length.

"I certainly do," was the emphatic response.

"Where do I come off if I keep this man? What's there in it from a business point of view?"

"A good deal, I think," Locke rejoined. "You've complained that Savage has never made good on the diamond. Well, you've only had a chance to judge from the poorer side of him. How do you know what he'll do in his present condition? It's like trying out a totally different man. He may develop into a pippin."

"And then do this lightning-change business just when I need him most?" the manager growled pessimistically. "Hanged if I want to monkey with a chameleon like that, son. I've got too many troubles running a crowd of normal, ordinary ball players to bother with freaks who change themselves every little while."

"But won't you give him a chance, Jack?" pleaded Lefty. "If you won't do it for him, or for the good it may bring to the organization, do it for me. I haven't asked you for many favors, have I?"

There was another pause. Then Kennedy's homely face expanded in that rare smile which

transformed it utterly. "Have it your own way, Kid," he muttered. "You mostly do when you really set out to get something. We'll give this changeling of yours another try-out, only remember this: If he falls down you won't have a leg left to stand on. There goes the gong."

He turned toward the dining room, and Lefty followed him. Even before they had crossed the lobby there came the scraping of a chair in the little space misnamed the writing room, and Nelson Savage moved slowly into the doorway. His face was set, and rather pale. The pupils of his eyes were dilated, and his expression was a curious mixture of pain, gratitude, and infinite regret.

CHAPTER XXVI

METAMORPHOSIS

FOR a minute or two Savage stood staring across the lobby after Locke and the manager. Then, as they disappeared into the dining room, he drew a long breath and raised one hand to his forehead with a puzzled, undecided gesture.

"*Jekyll and Hyde!*" he muttered in an odd voice as he turned back to the writing room. Beside the spotted, baise-covered table he paused again, looking down with thoughtful, unseeing eyes at the unfinished letter lying there.

"So that's it," he murmured under his breath. "I wonder?"

He frowned, and began tapping lightly on the table with one finger. His lids drooped, and his whole face was eloquent of troubled indecision. It was several minutes before he roused himself with a determined shake of the shoulders, and sat down.

"What a splendid friend that chap would make!" he said in a low tone, his somber face brightening momentarily. "He'd stick to a fel-

low through thick and thin, once he believed in him. I wish— Oh, thunder! What's the odds, anyhow!"

He drew the letter to him, and picked up a pen. Five minutes later he had sealed the envelope and dropped it into a side pocket; and when he presently entered the dining room no one could have guessed from his expression that he had so lately been stirred to the very depths of his being.

As he hesitated just inside the doorway, glancing from right to left, Locke, who had been watching for his appearance, hailed him from a near-by table.

"Better sit down here, Savage," he said pleasantly. "There's an extra place or two."

He had maneuvered so that one of those vacant chairs should be next his own, for his theories as to the busher's eccentricities had made him anxious to see as much as possible of the fellow, and study him at close range. Several of the other players looked surprised at this unwonted cordiality toward a man few of them had any use for. Larry Dalton's eyebrows went up comically as he glanced inquiringly toward his friend, but he made no audible comment. He rather suspected some elaborate joke, but, like the others, was content to wait until he got his bearings before joining in.

Savage showed neither hesitation nor embar-

rassment. He took possession of the chair beside the southpaw as if it were the most natural thing in the world, gave his order to the waiter, and settled back, his smiling eyes, so different in expression from the eyes his comrades had known, ranging composedly from one to another of the surprised faces.

Before the meal was over Lefty had observed enough to strengthen his belief in the accuracy of that odd supposition concerning dual personality. The Westerner's two natures were opposite as the poles. The snappy, grouchy, quarrelsome Savage who had become so unpopular with his companions and such a thorn in the manager's side, had nothing in common with the pleasant, well-mannered, somewhat retiring chap sitting at Locke's right. And Lefty was not the only one to notice the change. He could read in the faces of the others, and in the way they cast furtive glances at the busher, that they were equally astonished, and quite unable to know what to make of it all.

"What's the game, old man?" Dalton whispered, as they walked out into the lobby afterward. "What in thunder have you done to him? You must have done something. The mucker's almost human!"

Lefty shook his head. "You've got me," he returned briefly. "I haven't done a thing. He's been this way ever since he pulled Al and me out

of the river this morning. Maybe he's decided to turn over a new leaf."

"Huh!" grunted the infielder skeptically. "It's more likely he's putting up a game."

Locke made no comment on the suggestion. His eyes were fixed upon Savage, who stood a short distance away, talking with two or three players. His mind was busy with a new detail of the extremely interesting problem the man presented.

Was the fellow aware in his present state of what had been said and done by his other self? During dinner he had not talked a great deal, preferring apparently the rôle of listener. He had answered questions freely, however, and now and then volunteered a comment. To the ordinary observer there had been nothing at all out of the way in his manner, or in those brief remarks, but Lefty recalled now a certain keen attentiveness to what was being said which reminded him oddly of a deaf man feeling his way. There had also been one or two little inconsistencies of speech that seemed significant.

Still watching and thinking, Locke presently saw Pete Zacher stroll up and join the group. A moment or two later the recruit's harsh voice was raised in a note of surprise:

"Say, Nels, what in time have you done with your ring?"

Savage stared at him for a flash, then glanced swiftly down at his left hand.

"That's so," he said. "Much obliged for reminding me. Reckon I must have left it in my room when I was washing up."

"In your room?" repeated Zacher. "I thought you said you never took it off."

The Westerner hesitated for a second, then shrugged his shoulders lightly. "Did I say that?" he queried carelessly. "You mustn't take everything so literally. Very likely I didn't want to take it off at that particular time."

Zacher's lips curled. "I don't know what you meant; I only know what you said." He laughed disagreeably. "I s'pose there's hockshops, even in this little one-horse burg, eh?"

The recruit's expression scarcely changed, but to Lefty's observing eyes his smile had taken on a chilling quality.

"Very likely," he retorted quietly, turning on his heel. "You ought to know, if any one does. Going out to the park, Lefty?"

The southpaw nodded, and together they moved toward the door. In a breath Savage had committed two palpable inconsistencies. He had flatly contradicted a former utterance about the ring, while his manner showed undisguised dislike for a man with whom he had previously been on better terms than with any one in the squad.

It was scarcely possible that he would have done this with a full consciousness of that other personality.

Lefty had read of one or two such instances, but to come face to face with such a condition was vastly different. It seemed incredible—uncanny. He tried to picture the mental turmoil of a man awakening suddenly to an existence which had been snipped off as abruptly, perhaps, months before. The fellow must, by this time, have some notion of the state of affairs. He must realize that something almost like another soul inhabited his body at intervals. But to have absolutely no knowledge of what that other soul had been making his body do or say would be intolerable.

The busher's performance on the field that afternoon won a grudging nod or two of approval from doubting Jack Kennedy. There was nothing especially brilliant about his form, but Savage unquestionably showed an anxiety to do his best which had hitherto been conspicuously lacking.

"He might make a pitcher if he kept that up," admitted the manager to Lefty. "Of course he won't, though. About the time I begin thinking I can use him, he'll get hitting it up again, or have one o' them fits you tell about."

Though Locke waved away the possibility with some assurance, he was secretly troubled by that

very fear. With no data to guide him, he had not the least notion of how often these lapses occurred or what brought them about. The previous period had lasted over two weeks, at least; but, for all he knew, the present one might terminate at any moment. He cudgeled his brains to think of anything he could do to ward off such a catastrophe, but there seemed to be nothing save an effort to keep the busher's mind occupied and prevent him from brooding over his condition.

With this idea in mind, Lefty deliberately started in to make things as agreeable as he could for Savage, and before very long he discovered the task to be far from irksome. As in that brief railroad trip they had taken together in the North, he found the Westerner very winning and likable; and Savage left no doubt of that liking being returned. The end of the second day found them good friends indeed, and, curiously enough, none of Lefty's older cronies—Stillman, Dalton, Ogan, and the rest—showed any signs of disapproval at the intimacy.

Said Laughing Larry: "When a guy who's been as rotten as he has can turn himself into a first-rate, decent chap, it would be a crime not to encourage him."

Truly the metamorphosis had been complete. But would it last? That was the question which troubled the southpaw, and was scarcely ever ab-

sent from his mind. He had a feeling that the hateful transformation might come at any moment, and without the slightest warning. He could never be really sure in parting from Savage, even for an hour, that their next meeting would not find the busher's evil self again in control.

CHAPTER XXVII

ENTER: A GIRL

"GOING to do anything special to-night, Lefty?" asked Savage, as Locke hastily averted the searching glance of inquiry which he had come intuitively to cast on the Westerner almost every time they met.

"Not a thing," returned the southpaw promptly. "Got something on your mind?"

The busher hesitated an instant, oddly embarrassed; and for the first time that evening Lefty noticed that his companion was dressed with unusual care.

"I wonder if you'd mind—making a call with me?" Savage faltered. "Would it bore you?"

"I'll be glad to go," said Lefty readily. "Want to start right away?"

The Westerner nodded and turned toward the door. Pausing a moment at the desk to mail a letter he had just written, Locke joined him, and they left the hotel together. For a space they walked along in silence under the thick, spreading branches which met and intertwined above the

roadway. Then Savage turned suddenly toward his companion.

"There's a—friend of mine stopping here with her aunt," he said, with an effort at casualness which was not at all deceptive. "She's heard a lot about you, and she asked me to bring you around some evening." He hesitated perceptibly; in the bright light from one of the moving-picture theaters his face seemed rather flushed. "You've done a lot for me, old man, and been a mighty good friend," he went on impulsively. "I'd like to have you meet her."

A thrill of keen interest, mingled with relief, surged over Lefty. In a flash he realized that the Westerner's manner could mean but one thing: There was a woman in the case. A woman, provided the busher had a deep enough interest in her, was likely to prove a strong influence for good in his present condition. Moreover, her presence in Tulane explained the recruit's absence from the hotel on the previous evening—a circumstance which had worried Locke not a little.

"I'd be glad to meet her, Nels," he said simply, "and I certainly appreciate your compliment in wanting me to. That's all rot, though, about my having done anything for you. If there's any indebtedness between us, it's on my side."

It was so dark under the trees that neither man could see the other's face. Lefty was conscious,

however, of his friend turning swiftly toward him with a quick-drawn breath.

"Do you think I don't know?" the busher asked almost sharply. "I'm not much of a talker, but some day I may have a chance to do something; and, believe me—"

His teeth came together with a click, cutting off the words abruptly, and leaving the southpaw devoured with curiosity. Just what did Savage mean? Was he referring merely to Locke's marked friendliness, or had he something more vital in mind? Did he really know much of the behavior of his other self, or was it merely guesswork?

Had there been time Lefty would have managed to frame some sort of an indirect question, but just as he was thinking out a way of pursuing the subject, his companion pushed through a gate and led the way up a brick walk to the wide portico and spreading façade of a typical Southern house.

The door was opened by a negro butler, who took their hats and ushered them into a room at the right of the wide hall. It was an attractive apartment furnished with admirable taste in old mahogany and rosewood, but the southpaw had no time to observe details. A fire flickered on the hearth, and, standing before it, her back to the door, was a slender girl, a glimpse of whom made

Lefty's heart bound and sent the color flaming to his very temples.

"Janet!" he gasped, in a low, dazed tone. "Why—"

He broke off abruptly with a stifled gasp of disappointment as the girl turned, revealing the charming, piquant face and smiling gray eyes of a stranger.

"I'm delighted to meet you, Mr. Locke," she said, with an attractive Southern accent, as Savage presented his friend. "My aunt, Mrs. Randolph."

Lefty stammered out his acknowledgments rather haltingly. When the white-haired, Dresden-china old lady had resumed her chair by the center table, his gaze returned to Miss Celia Berkeley.

"Didn't I hear you say something as you came in, Mr. Locke?" she asked demurely, but with laughter lurking in her eyes. "It sounded like—a name. I might almost venture to say a girl's name."

Lefty smiled. "It was," he acknowledged. "As you stood before the fire you looked so like a girl I know up North that it gave me quite a shock."

Even now, with the lamplight full on her face, he could still see that odd, tantalizing resemblance to the girl who meant more to him than

any one else in the world. Her height was nearly the same as Janet Harting's, and it seemed that they had been cast in the same dainty mold. The way she carried her head was like Janet's manner, too, and while her hair was a shade darker than the Northern girl's, it curled and waved above her perfect ears and at her temples in that fascinating manner with which the southpaw was so familiar.

"Really?" exclaimed Miss Berkeley interestedly. "Do you mean to say I have a double somewhere?"

"Hardly that. It's more a superficial resemblance of height and hair and that sort of thing than any real likeness."

The girl dimpled, and her eyes gleamed mischievously. "That means she's heaps more attractive, doesn't it?"

Lefty flushed a little. "I didn't say so," he protested.

"You didn't have to," she countered. "I have a trick of reading people's minds, sometimes, and I'm quite sure she's lovely. You must tell me all about her."

The southpaw did not need much urging. He had not laid eyes on Janet in over a month, and he hungered for a sight of her. There had been no letter, even, for the better part of a week. He had written lengthily that very night, asking if

there was anything the matter, and he wished now that he had wired. Naturally, he painted a glowing picture of Miss Harting's charms, which would have made that young person blush, and which caused the girl sitting opposite him to give a long sigh, the dimple still dancing in her cheek.

"If I even make you think of such an attractive creature, I am desperately flattered," she said. "I have a feeling that I'd like this Janet of yours immensely, so you must bring us together when I go North this summer. You'll promise, won't you?"

Of course Lefty did. He meant to keep that promise, too, for he felt that she and Janet would get along famously together. Miss Berkeley seemed quite as fond of baseball as Janet, though Locke discovered, when the conversation presently turned on that subject, that she lacked a good deal of Janet's technical knowledge of the game; and they were both attached to baseball players. If that didn't make them friends, the southpaw decided, nothing would.

The evening was quite the pleasantest Lefty had passed since training season began. The three young people chatted on all sorts of subjects while Mrs. Randolph, though mainly occupied with her knitting, added a remark now and then which showed that she was following the conversation. There was nothing in the least stiff or

formal about the call; on the contrary, it passed off with an atmosphere of friendliness which made Locke feel as if he had known the ladies for a long time. When the two ball players left, shortly before ten, it was with the promise to return for dinner the following evening.

They were halfway back to the hotel before a sudden qualm made Lefty break off abruptly in the midst of a most enthusiastic tribute to Miss Berkeley's qualities.

"By George, Nels!" he exclaimed. "I hadn't any business to accept that invitation to dinner."

"Why not? Got a date?"

"N-o, but I'll be butting in and spoiling another evening for you. She seemed really to want me to come, and it never occurred to me until this minute that it was probably her Southern hospitality that made her do it."

Savage laughed softly. "Don't you go worrying about that. She asked you, didn't she? Well, that's enough. She wouldn't have done it unless she wanted you. I can't imagine why, of course," —his voice held a tone of mischievous teasing,— "but I know Celia. If your attention wasn't already occupied elsewhere, I'd probably be steering you off. As it is, I'm mighty glad you get on so well together."

There was no mistaking his earnestness, and,

though still entertaining some slight misgivings, Locke let the matter drop.

Returning from the field next afternoon, he was buttonholed by Kennedy, who kept him talking for nearly an hour. This still left him plenty of time to dress, but he lost track of Savage. On descending finally to the lobby, he found at the desk a note from the other man saying that Miss Berkeley had asked him to come around early, while Locke was to follow as soon as he was ready.

"Glad they'll have a few minutes alone, anyhow," the southpaw said to himself as he walked briskly down Main Street. "I'll be hanged if I can understand why she wants to drag in a third party. I'm sure I wouldn't."

As he walked he fell to wondering—not for the first time that day—whether Celia Berkeley was aware of Savage's peculiar mental shifts. It seemed scarcely possible, considering her lighthearted gayety, and yet it would be a thing most difficult of concealment in such an intimate friendship. Perhaps she did know, and was bravely concealing the fact in an effort to keep the man she cared for from slipping back to that other hateful self. The possibility made Lefty long more than ever to help in the affair. He was wondering whether he might dare to broach the subject some day to Miss Berkeley alone, when he reached the gate of the Randolph place, and,

glancing up, saw the slender girl coming toward him.

She was dressed in some white, clinging stuff which made her seem slenderer than ever. She wore a wide, drooping garden hat which partly concealed her face. In the shadowy half light her amazing likeness to Janet struck on Lefty's senses with a fresh thrill. "If only it could be Janet!" he thought, as the gate clicked behind him.

"Good evening, Miss Berkeley," he said, in a voice which he kept steady only by an effort. "I hope I'm not too early."

With a swift, indescribable motion, the girl flung back her head, and stretched out both hands impulsively in a manner which sent the blood drumming in Locke's temples, and made him leap forward with a stifled cry of astonishment and joy.

She was not Celia Berkeley, but Janet Harting!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BETTER MAN DOMINANT

"AND so you really think Janet and I will like each other?" inquired Miss Berkeley, her eyes sparkling mischievously above the bowl of flowers in the center of the candle-lit table.

The southpaw's answering laugh was clear and mirthful, without even a suspicion of pique. With Janet sitting beside him there was no room in his mind for anything but pure, unadulterated delight.

"Oh, I'm the only original goat, all right," he admitted cheerfully. "You two certainly played the game to the queen's taste." He glanced sidewise at Janet. "I've never even heard you mention Miss Berkeley's name, to say nothing about being friends."

The girl dimpled charmingly. "I didn't. I only met her the last time I was staying in New York. We got on famously, though, and when she asked me to visit her we both thought it would be great fun to surprise you."

"You sure did it!" Lefty chuckled. "You'd make a clever actress, Miss Berkeley. I did

wonder a bit why, with one pitcher already attached, you'd want another butting in."

"In other words, you thought me a dreadful flirt," said the girl. "Well, now it's all over, I warn you to make the best use of your time. Janet and I are here for only three days."

Locke's face fell. "Three days! Why, I thought you'd surely be here until we break up."

"There's no reason in the world why you shouldn't, Celia," put in Mrs. Randolph from her end of the table. "You know I should love to have you and Miss Harting stay as long as you please."

Miss Berkeley shook her shapely head. "I'm sure you would, Aunt Julia, but it's quite impossible. I've simply got to get back to look after dad and the boys. It was all I could do to persuade them to let me off for this one week. Of course," she added, with a glance at the man opposite her, "it isn't as if we were going a thousand miles from here. Savannah's not more than eighty, is it? I know we make it in about four hours."

"Hum!" murmured Lefty. "I suppose a fellow might get off for a Sunday if we worked Jack right." He looked at Savage. "Reckon we'll have to make the most of these three days, old man, but they're going to seem awfully short."

It was long after ten when the two men departed, but both commented on the brevity of their stay. In the morning, too, it required something of an effort for Lefty to concentrate his mind on the work of training. But he was not the sort to waste time in vain regrets.

Savage worked hard, and made such a good showing that about the middle of the morning Kennedy took him in hand and began coaching him personally. Lefty had noticed the manager hovering about the Westerner, watching him in a surreptitious sort of way, and he was not surprised when old Jack suddenly abandoned his skeptical attitude.

For the remainder of the morning and all afternoon the lanky baseball veteran kept at it, hammer and tongs, criticizing almost everything Savage did, and only varying the monotony by an occasional rare grunt of approval. It seemed as if he were doing his best to discourage the man or drive him to an outburst of anger, and Locke watched his friend with some anxiety as to the outcome. Knowing the old manager better, probably, than any one else in the squad, he realized that this seeming onslaught was in the nature of a compliment. Kennedy never wasted time on the hopelessly incompetent. If a recruit showed little or no promise he mentally checked him off as deadwood, and got rid of him at the earliest

possible moment. He would never have kept Savage as long as this but for the necessity of having some one to relieve his old twirlers in pitching to the other players, and latterly on account of Lefty's warm personal interest in the man. It was evident now that he had altered his opinion, and if the Westerner could only realize this and continue his good work under the grilling fire of criticism, he stood a chance to make good.

His performance surpassed even Locke's hopes. Not once did he lose his head or his temper, though several times it seemed as if the latter was badly strained. Without comment he followed Kennedy's directions, pitching the same ball over and over again until he had succeeded in pleasing his critic. There was no trace of sullenness or boredom in his manner. He seemed to be giving the best that was in him, honestly striving to improve his form. He made no objection when the spitball was suggested, and his ability at that erratic sort of delivery was so marked as to surprise the manager into a burst of approval.

"You get a good break on that spitter," he said. "That's the sort of stuff I've been trying to get out of you for two weeks."

To Locke, on their way back from the park, he was even more enthusiastic:

"The boy's got the makings of a twirler in him. You saw his spitball? Reminded you of Ed

Walsh, didn't it? He'll improve before we start North, and if he only don't go an' slump—"

"I don't know why he should," Lefty said reassuringly. "He's got every possible inducement for keeping up the pace."

He had a feeling that it was not a matter of volition with Savage. But, knowing Kennedy's skepticism regarding the matter of dual personality, he refrained from voicing it.

"Well, I hope he does," old Jack said briefly. "Young Temple's doing fair, but that's about all." He chewed on his cigar for a moment, then went on meditatively: "I've half a notion to put Savage in the box when we play that Atlanta team next week. They're a tough bunch, from what I hear, and if he could make a showing against 'em, I'd begin to think I'd found a pitcher."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE ETERNAL FEMININE

WITH proverbial Southern hospitality, Mrs. Randolph insisted that the two ball players dine at her house on each of the three evenings before the departure of her niece and Miss Harting for Savannah. On the last of these evenings they were asked to come early enough for afternoon tea, which was served on a flagged terrace overlooking an attractive, old-fashioned garden laid out on the slope leading down to the river. It was a charming spot.

When the teacups were emptied and Mrs. Randolph had retired for her customary rest before dinner, Celia Berkeley lost no time in suggesting that Janet take the southpaw for a little stroll.

"I know he's curious to see what a real Southern garden looks like," she remarked, her gray eyes dancing. "Nelson doesn't care much for flowers, so we'll wait for you here."

Lefty embraced the suggestion with enthusiasm, and without further delay they passed through the belt of shrubbery to one of the winding, box-bordered paths; a wilderness of flowers on either

hand, before them the glinting river with a distant line of blue hills, beyond which the sun was dropping.

It was the first time they had been really alone, and there were quantities of things to say, none of which would have been of the slightest interest to a third person. Besides, back in Lefty's mind was a half-formed notion of confiding to Janet his perplexities regarding Nelson Savage—perplexities which had been increased not a little that day by a change he had noticed in the busher's manner.

It was nothing he would have paid much attention to under ordinary conditions. Savage had been noticeably thoughtful and preoccupied ever since breakfast, as if there were something on his mind. But nowadays the southpaw was fearful of the slightest alteration in his friend's demeanor, and he had a positive longing to talk the matter over with a sympathetic, interested confidant.

At length they reached the end of the garden and paused, momentarily silent, beside an ancient stile which gave access through a moss-grown stone wall to the peach orchard and, beyond, the river. The sun had dipped out of sight behind the hazy, purple hills, leaving the sky a riot of orange and flaunting crimson. The sloping orchard before them was a sea of delicate pink. At their feet, sheltered by the wall, and creeping over it in places, a wild tangle of yellow jasmine

sprawled untrammeled, perfuming the air afar with its heavy fragrance. It seemed to Lefty as if such a spot must necessarily beget confidences, and in a moment his mind was made up.

"Nels Savage is a good sort," he began tentatively.

"Isn't he!" agreed Janet. "I liked him the minute I saw him."

"It's certainly lucky, then, that you didn't see him a week ago," Locke said emphatically. "He wasn't the same man at all."

Janet bent suddenly and plucked a sprig of jasmine. Usually devoted to flowers, she seemed bent now on stripping the stem clean of its star-like yellow blossoms.

"Not the same?" she repeated slowly, her eyes bent on the unconscious work of destruction. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. You wouldn't have known him. He was grouchy and ill-tempered. The whole crowd hated him like poison. I couldn't stand him myself, and you know how thick we are now. When I think of what an unmitigated ruffian he was—"

"But, Phil!" The girl's head came up suddenly; her eyes were wide—protesting. "You don't understand. He wasn't— He had to—"

She broke off with a quick little gasp of dismay, and clapped one hand to her lips. For a second

she stood silent, the color creeping into her face, her startled gaze fixed intently on Lefty's narrowed, questioning eyes.

"Well?" queried the southpaw at length. "What did he have to do? Aren't you going to finish?"

Janet dropped her hand and glanced down through the long vista of straight, slender trunks with their crowns of blossoms.

"I don't know that there is anything more to say," she answered slowly. "I suppose I was thinking how impossible it was for a man like Mr. Savage to—act as you say he did, unless—unless—he was obliged to. Don't you think we'd better start back? It must be almost time for dinner."

Lefty ignored the last remark. His face was serious—almost stern. His eyes were fixed intently on Janet's profile. The perfume from the jasmine seemed suddenly to have become almost sickening in its cloying sweetness.

"Unless he was obliged to!" he repeated in an odd tone. "Can you suggest, Janet, any possible reason which would necessitate a fellow like Savage turning himself voluntarily into a beast?"

"But I know so little of him," she protested. "How can I tell—how can any one tell—what motives govern some one who is almost a stranger? Don't be absurd, Phil, and make a mountain out

of a molehill. Mr. Savage is nothing to me except that he's practically engaged to Celia, and I like him."

Lefty did not speak for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders slightly, and turned toward the house.

"It *is* getting rather late," he said quietly. "Perhaps, as you say, we'd better go in."

His voice was colder than he realized. It was merely the man's instinct to hide from a woman the fact that she had hurt him. That Janet knew something was perfectly evident. What it could be he had not the slightest idea, save that it had to do with the problem he had been trying his best to solve. He had no wish to force her confidence, but the fact that she was unwilling to give it freely stung him to the quick.

The girl herself started slightly at his tone, and turned a little pale. Then her chin went up in that old, familiar movement, and without a word she fell into step beside him, walking back to the house in silence.

The evening was not exactly a lively one. Lefty did his best to forget the incident and behave as if nothing unpleasant had happened. He honestly wanted to ignore it, but always at the back of his mind was the consciousness that Janet was keeping something from him. It was her own secret to keep or reveal as she chose; he admitted

that. It might amount to nothing in the end; though, knowing the girl as he did, such a possibility was doubtful. But it had to do with another man, and there is no suitor alive, though he may have absolute faith in the woman he cares for, who can behold with equanimity that woman mixing up in the intimate affairs of even his best friend, if it be to his own exclusion.

Janet was, by turns, dull and superficially brilliant. At nine she pleaded a bad headache and wished to retire, thus breaking up the party prematurely. The girls were leaving at an hour which made it impossible for Lefty or Savage to see them off, so the good-bys had to be said that night. They left Locke enraged at himself, provoked at Janet, and soured with the world generally. He had a feeling that he was a brute who had spoiled what would otherwise have been three days to look back upon with unalloyed pleasure. He even blamed Savage because his interest in the busher had prompted him to ask that unfortunate question; and on reaching the hotel he hunted up a paper and took refuge behind its open sheets, mainly to avoid mingling with one of the several groups scattered about the lobby.

He did not escape; one of the groups joined him. He had scarcely settled down before Jack Stillman, Dalton, and Al Ogan invaded the ancient

leather-covered sofa. The irrepressible Larry gently removed the newspaper and sat on it.

"What the deuce do you want with the world's happenings?" he inquired airily. "Within a month we'll be making history ourselves. Listen, till I tell you some real news. Did you know there was going to be a genuine, old-fashioned horse race over at the county seat next Saturday?"

"No; is there?" was the indifferent reply.

"There is. Wouldn't you like to take it in?"

Lefty shrugged his shoulders. "I can't say I'm pining away with any such desire."

Dalton sighed and cast up his eyes. "Gee! You're about as lively to-night as a wooden Indian. I thought you'd be all for it. Anybody who's got a passably good nag around here will enter, and they say there's an Englishman come on from the West with a couple of fast ones. It ought to be more fun than a badger pull."

Locke drew himself up in the corner of the sofa, and surveyed the volatile infielder. "Have you figured out how you're going to get off to see this jamboree?" he inquired briefly.

"Well, you know what a store Jack sets by you, old man," Dalton said ingratiatingly. "We thought if you asked him—"

"Nothing doing!" put in Lefty decisively. "I'm not going to lay myself out for a panning.

By next Saturday the old man will probably have games scheduled for every other day or so, and you've got just about as much chance of getting off for the afternoon as a snowball has down below. If you're so keen about it, ask him yourself."

All of which goes to show how completely a misunderstanding with a girl could sour even as good-tempered a man as Lefty Locke. Later, in his room, he realized that he had been rather short, and regretted it; but by that time he had begun to consider Janet's abruptly terminated remark in detail and ponder over it.

She had intimated that Savage had been obliged to act the part of an ill-mannered rowdy in the early part of the training season. Whether she knew what she was talking about was, of course, a question; but if it was true, Lefty's hypothesis of dual personality was knocked into a cocked hat. But how could it be true? How could any man deliberately work the transformation which had occurred in Savage's case? How could any normal human being, of his own volition, be sane and decent and likable one day; a coarse, evil-eyed rowdy the next? Above all, supposing such a thing were possible, why should he do it?

CHAPTER XXX

THE ATLANTA TIGERS

THE days which followed were so full that Lefty had little time in which to trouble over the coolness of Janet. As the end of the training season loomed in sight, Kennedy worked his squad harder and harder. The mornings were devoted to all sorts of intricacies having to do with "inside" baseball. Each afternoon saw a hotly contested game between the Regulars and Yannigans, now lengthened to full nine innings. There were long runs to and from the park, bathing, massaging; and the result of it all was that the men slowly but surely shaped into the pink of condition. Those who had been overweight found themselves getting back to normal, while the few who needed it gained the coveted pounds under this wholesome, healthy routine.

The men, one and all, ran faster, batted harder, and threw with more confidence and accuracy. The members of the pitching staff had worked out that first inevitable soreness, and were beginning to put on steam. Best of all was the growing sense of efficiency—the delight in doing without

effort something which had, a short time before, been so laborious.

There was one feature of this period which was not so pleasant to the thoughtfully inclined. Scarcely a day passed that did not see the squad diminished by one or more members. It is not so bad when a recruit departs. He is young, and life lies before him; another chance will come if he is worth his salt. But the case of an old-timer who has failed to stay with fast company is rather tragic. He has outlived his usefulness. It is the beginning of the end. He will go swiftly down the ladder he, perhaps, climbed laboriously, to end in the oblivion of the bushes whence he emerged so short a time before.

Happily, this season, there were no especially trying instances of this sort. Herman Brosk, the veteran center fielder, realizing that the inevitable had come, spared Kennedy the performance of a distasteful duty by stepping down and out of his own accord. But he was known to have saved his earnings with German thrift, and to be the possessor of a profitable farm in the Middle West. Spider Grant's case was harder, but even he had hopes that a year of care and treatment would put him in shape again. As for Jack Daly, the old third baseman, Kennedy simply benched him, trusting to carry him through the season as a pinch hitter.

Of the new men, Ogan was retained at first, Tap Palsifer at third, while Congreve showed such signs of developing into an exceptional hitter that he was taken on. The fate of Red McLean, Tetlow, and Lane still hung in the balance. The remaining recruits were all shipped to minor leagues, where they would have a year in which to become better fitted for fast company.

On the pitching staff, Temple and Nelson Savage were the only youngsters retained. The former showed indications of becoming a fair, all-round twirler of the sort who might never be spectacular, but could always be depended on. As for Savage, his general work improved constantly; but it was his cleverness with the spitball which attracted general attention and admiration.

Lefty could detect no signs of threatened backsliding in the Westerner's manner. There was a slight restlessness to be noticed at times, and one evening he disappeared from the hotel, returning very late. Aside from these trifling instances he continued to be the same pleasant, likable chap, friendly with all, but particularly devoted to the southpaw, and intensely keen about his progress on the diamond.

The game with the Atlanta Tigers was looked forward to with interest by every man in the squad. The first contest with an outside team always is an event in training camp, but this par-

ticular crowd of Southern professionals had a reputation for unusual ability, and a hot go was predicted.

When they arrived at the hotel just in time for dinner on the day of the game, their appearance seemed to proclaim them real ball players. Bronzed of face, keen and alert of expression, snappy in movement, they bore themselves with an air of quiet assurance which narrowly escaped being cocky.

"Some bunch, that!" commented Dalton, a little later, as he and Lefty stood watching the visitors indulging in gingery practice.

"They should be," rejoined Locke. "I understand they've won every game to date. We ought to take a fall out of them."

"Hope so. I'd feel a lot more sure, though, if you were going to be in the box instead of Nels. He's been showing form lately, but you can't tell how he'd stand being hammered."

"I wouldn't worry about that." The southpaw's tone was confident. "His head's screwed on all right. Unless I miss my guess, he'll make an even better showing against this crowd than he has in practice. He's the sort of a fellow who does his best when pushed to it. Well, there they go. We take the field."

As Savage walked out to the mound Locke could not help contrasting his demeanor with what it had

been on that day when the "vanishing ball" had so startled and bewildered the portsider. He was juggling his glove and smiling over some joke Dalton had made in passing, and seemed utterly devoid of nervousness. He had been cool before, but that was the sneering nonchalance of one who did not care, as different from his manner now as day is different from night. Locke had a sudden conviction that the game would produce no such semihypnotic tricks as the busher had worked off before. Those had been part and parcel of that other detestable personality. The Savage who stood there, a smile lingering on his lips, but with eyes keenly sizing up the batter taking his place at the pan, was incapable of such wretched artifices. He would pitch straight ball, and win or lose on his ability as a legitimate twirler.

Unless two teams have played against each other before, the first inning of a game is likely to prove something of a lottery. Neither pitcher has had a chance of getting a line on the opposing batters. A few fortunate twirlers seem possessed of a sort of sixth sense, almost like intuition, but this is generally no more than an unusually keen observation, coupled with long experience in facing an infinite variety of batters.

Savage had undergone no very lengthy experience. His first delivery was a tentative teaser at which Olds, the big outfielder, failed to

nibble. His second was also wide; then something in the batter's attitude seemed to tell him that a high, close ball might be difficult for him to meet.

It was a wrong guess. Olds rapped the horsehide with unexpected ease, pushing a warm grounder into right field. He sought to draw a hasty throw by romping over first and turning toward second, but Rufe Hyland was wise, and winged a perfect heave to Lewis, who covered the bassock.

Big as he was, and apparently unwieldy, Olds proved astonishingly fast. Taking a deceptively small lead off the sack, he went down, nevertheless, like a flash on the first ball handed up to Moore, the Tiger first baseman.

Evidently expecting such a move, the latter swung at the ball without trying to hit it, his sole intention being to bother the catcher. Dirk Nelson caught the ball in perfect throwing position, and got it off to second with a sharp, short-arm throw.

But the runner covered ground so fast and made such a perfect "fall-away" slide that it was impossible to tell whether he touched the sack first or was tagged successfully. It seemed simultaneous, and he was declared safe.

"Some start," remarked Lefty, who sat on the bench with Pink Dillon. "You wouldn't think

that big fellow could get over the ground like that, would you?"

"No. I hope it don't rattle Nels."

His fears were short-lived, for Savage showed no trace of annoyance, even. Toeing the slab, he carried the ball to his mouth, covered with both hands. There was an upward and backward motion of his head, and suddenly the captain of the Tigers shouted:

"Look out for the spitter, Irish!"

The admonition was to no purpose. The ball, whizzing from Savage's fingers, took a sharp shoot toward the ground as if actually dodging the bat!

"Strik-ah!" announced the umpire.

Savage repeated the performance, but this time his shoot carried the sphere a shade wide. At least, that was how it evidently appeared to the umpire, an official belonging to the visiting team.

When Savage had handed up two more balls he found himself compelled to put the horsehide over. Behind his hands he pretended to make ready to throw the spitter again, but, instead of moistening the ball, he wiped it as dry as possible on his glove, and delivered a straight smoker for the inside corner.

Moore seemed almost to anticipate what was coming, for to all appearances he thrust out his bat and held it so loosely in his fingers that the ball almost knocked it from his hands. In this

manner he dropped a bunt in front of the plate, and was off toward first.

On the alert, Olds was away like a shot toward third. But Savage had not been caught napping, for the moment the ball left his fingers he was chasing it in. Snatching it up, he whirled to throw, realized that it was too late to catch Olds, and, without a perceptible loss of motion, spun on around, sending the sphere to first. It sped past Moore's shoulder, and Ogan had it with the runner ten feet away.

But the sacrifice had been successful. The Tigers had a man on third, with only one out. Their chance to score seemed good.

CHAPTER XXXI

TWO RUNS BEHIND

"THAT'S the game!" cried McCormick, the visiting captain. "Get into it, Rick. Here's where we pull in a little old run or two. On your toes, Irish."

It was an excellent opportunity for a squeeze play, and as Allaire hurried to the plate the infielders closed in, ready to go after the ball the instant it was dumped into the diamond.

Savage, evidently believing that the squeeze would be attempted, handed up a shoot, high and close. Allaire made a foul, and Olds was fully halfway down the line before he could pull himself up and turn back to the sack.

Returning to third, Olds edged off toward the plate, knees bent, every muscle tense.

Savage flashed a glance at him, then got into position to pitch. He did not start to deliver the ball, however, but, suddenly stepping toward third, whipped it to Palsifer.

Three times Savage drove Olds back to the cushion, but when again he pitched, the runner stretched his legs for the plate. Unfortunately

for him, Allaire simply popped a little fly into the pitcher's hands, and Savage, taking his time, threw it to third for a double.

The abrupt termination of the inning brought a grim smile to the lips of Jack Kennedy, who, resting on one knee, with arms doubled under his chest in a characteristic attitude, had been watching the progress of the game. To him the result of the contest was of no importance whatever. It was simply an opportunity to size up his players. Savage had done nothing extraordinary, but he had kept his head and used it, and that satisfied the manager for the present.

Buck Liddell, the slender, wiry, rather handsome pitcher for the Tigers, bore himself in a confident manner, with just a trace of self-consciousness. His wavy blond hair, worn rather long, had a way of trailing down now and then over his forehead, to be tossed back by a jerk of his head, or swept aside with a quick movement of his hand.

"Reckon he's some bear with the Atlanta dames," chuckled Joe Welsh, as he stepped to the plate.

"Regular matinée idol," agreed Kid Lewis, swinging a couple of bats.

Liddell nonchalantly sent a couple of sizzlers across to the first baseman while the catcher was adjusting his mask and wind pad. They fairly smoked, denoting that he had speed, at least. A

moment later he toed the slab, swung his arm in a wide sweep, balanced himself on one foot for an instant, and shot over one which Welsh missed by inches.

The next had a hop on it and the batter fouled. Another foul followed and the Big Leaguer recovered himself, a slight frown wrinkling his forehead. When Liddell made ready to pitch again he went through the movements which seemed to indicate great speed. But suddenly, following those movements, he sent in a ball that seemed to drag and hang in the air. Welsh, who a month later would have called it a cinch, was fooled like any youngster, and struck too soon.

"You're out!" said the umpire.

"What's he got, Joe?" asked Lewis in passing.

"Mostly speed and a change of pace. Look out for that."

Lewis made a bid for a hit off the second ball pitched to him. It was a snappy grounder, hugging the sod, but the shortstop made a splendid one-handed stop, whipping the ball to first for a put-out.

Rufe Hyland did better, dropping a fly over the infield, and romping to first with ease. With the first ball pitched to Dalton, Rufe was off down the base line. Thanks to a high throw on the part of the backstop, he made the sack; and his teammates began to root for a run, urging Dalton to

smash out one of the two-baggers which had been his speciality during the previous season.

But Laughing Larry had not regained his batting form of six months before. The best he could do was to lift out a long fly which the opposing left fielder secured without any great expenditure of effort; and the Tigers romped in, pleased by the manner in which they had held down the famous Blue Stockings.

The latter did not seem to be seriously disturbed at the way things were going. There was a lot of josh and banter as they spread out on the diamond. They remembered that they had been in training for little more than two weeks, whereas their opponents, bushers though they were, had been playing the game much longer. They knew that a few weeks hence they would be able easily to beat a team twice as good as this one.

But when, in the second inning, through a series of fielding errors, combined with a strong hitting streak on the part of the Tigers, the latter managed to push two men across the rubber, the pride of the Blue Stockings began to be touched.

"It's up to us to wake up," Dalton remarked, with his infectious grin. "Reckon we've been taking things too easy. Oh, you're all right, kid," he added, catching Savage's eye. "You've got the goods. It's the rest of us dubs that have been loafing on hits and pegging wild. Suppose

we try a dash of pepper." His gaze shifted around the circle, coming to rest for an instant on the face of Jack Kennedy, who stood within hearing distance. "I guess it won't hurt anybody, to perk up a mite and show this crowd that we're not all down with the Charley horse."

The manager nodded. "Get after their pitcher the moment he lets up," was his advice. "He won't last nine innings. He's putting every blamed thing he's got on the ball now, and it's going to wear him out before long."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BREAK

WHETHER or not old Jack was right in his prediction—it was probable that he was, since he had few superiors in the subtle art of sizing up a ball player—Buck Liddell certainly showed no immediate signs of slumping. He kept up his extraordinary pace, varying speed, curves, and slow balls in a manner which proved that he possessed exceptional judgment. In the last half of the second only three men faced him; in the third inning, but four. The Blue Stocking batters, piqued by his steadiness, put forth their best efforts to hit him effectively, but in vain.

Savage was equally successful in preventing further scoring on the part of the visitors, though his methods were quite different. He made no attempt, apparently, to try for Liddell's strike-out record, preferring to rely on the support of the men back of him. Each inning saw one or more hits made off him, and the bases were populated most of the time. He was chary of the spitball—that most trying delivery in a pitcher's

repertoire. He used few curves—not nearly so many as his companions knew him to command. It might have been noticed, however, that he varied these with such skill that the effect, though seemingly so infinitely inferior to Liddell's performance, was practically on a par with it. Always at the crucial moment he stiffened, putting forth all the skill he possessed, using spitter or speed or curve, as the occasion demanded.

In the first half of the fifth, with only one out, the Tigers had men on first and second. It was evident that the batter would try to sacrifice, and Locke rather expected Savage to keep the ball high and close in an effort to prevent this. To his surprise the Westerner lobbed over a low one which could not have suited a stickman better if it had been made to order. As in the first inning, however, he followed the pitch through, and was almost on the plate when the batter sent the sphere rolling slowly along the third-base line. Pouncing on it with amazing swiftness, Savage snapped it to third for a force-out. Without an instant's hesitation, Palsifer lined it down to second, beating the runner from first by a foot, and retiring the side in a twinkling.

Kennedy, who stood a few feet away, wheeled toward Lefty. "There's a bit of headwork," he said.

Tap, the infielder, loped in from his posi-

tion, grinning widely over the successful double play.

"Was that turn put up between you and Savage?" the manager asked him.

"Sure!" chuckled Palsifer. "He tipped me off to stick by the base next time a bunt was expected. It worked, didn't it?"

"It did!" The manager turned to Locke again. "He uses his head. He's been using it right along. You've seen how he's been sparing himself and depending on his support. That's what fielders draw their salaries for—to stop balls that are hit at 'em. This boy's got the right idea. He's not wearing himself out like that fellow yonder." He indicated Liddell, strolling across the diamond. "He's not giving away all he's got in the first couple of innings. He's holding back a trick or two for a pinch. That's the sort of a man I like to handle, and the sort I can make something of."

Lefty had rarely heard the old manager express himself so warmly over a recruit, and the southpaw was more than pleased by the fact that Savage was making good. After his intervention in the Westerner's behalf he felt more or less responsible, and it was agreeable to realize that his judgment had not been wrong.

During the last of the fifth Liddell showed signs of growing unsteadiness, which increased when he

was hit by the first two men up. He managed to pull himself together in time to prevent an avalanche of runs, but during the lapse the score was tied, and the entire Blue Stocking contingent felt that it was only a question of another inning or so before the final blow-up.

McCormick, of the Tigers, opened the sixth inning with a single, but the lead he took off first was much less than it would have been earlier in the game. Savage had shown dangerous speed and accuracy in throwing to bases, and the visitors were becoming cautious.

Sam Vogt, the clever little Southern shortstop, was handy at laying down bunts; but Savage kept the first two balls high and close and Vogt found himself in a hole before he knew it.

"That's the stuff, Nels!" cried Dalton. "You've got this chicken cold!"

Savage smiled. Suddenly his whole frame stiffened as if stricken by some strange paralysis. Seconds passed, and still he stood quite motionless, a perfect picture of arrested action, eyes set, the healthy color draining from his face.

As he stared at him in astonishment Lefty felt a sudden premonitory tightening of the throat, and his heart began to beat more rapidly. Then Larry Dalton broke the spell.

"Come alive, old man," he sang out amiably, "and take this victim into camp."

Savage shivered slightly. The next instant, with a little shake of his shoulders, he sent the sphere straight over the center of the pan with only moderate speed.

It was the sort of ball the rawest of recruits might have pitched, and Vogt fell on it with violent delight, smashing out a hot two-bagger. McCormick reached third, and might have scored but for the fast fielding of Max Duoro.

"Well, what do you know about that?" muttered Kennedy, penthouse brows coming together above his big nose.

Lefty made no answer. His eyes were riveted on his friend's face. He was conscious of a sickening sense of apprehension stealing over him. Had it come? Could it be possible that the man out there was fated to undergo that horrible transformation again, and at the very height of his triumph?

CHAPTER XXXIII

SUSPENSE

McKNIGHT, the second baseman, was up, and ready. A successful bunt or a long sacrifice fly would give McCormick a chance to register.

Savage took the signal from Nelson, and nodded. His face was no longer pale, but his jaws were hard, and his lips set in a straight line.

The sphere cut the air, passing high with a slight inswerve, and McKnight's attempt to bunt was a failure.

McCormick was sent diving back to third by Nelson, who whipped the ball to Palsifer. The runner managed to reach the sack, but it was by a desperately narrow margin.

The infielders had crept up into the diamond, and were balancing on their toes. Lefty's heart was pounding; his eyes never left the pitcher's face.

A second time Savage put the ball over high and close, with that same inswerve. Though the batter again did his best to bunt, he only succeeded in making a small foul.

"Got him, Nels—got him!" cried Laughing Larry. "He's in a hole now."

McKnight spread his legs, and, taking a fresh grip on the bat, waited for a good one—waited too long. Savage started the ball high. The man at bat evidently fancied it would pass above his shoulders. Too late he saw it take a marvelous drop, shooting down across his chest.

"Three—you're out!"

Lefty drew a breath of relief, and his tense muscles relaxed. Savage was evidently still there with the goods. Perhaps that inexplicable lapse had been only momentary. Perhaps the thing Locke dreaded had not come, after all.

Wurts, the next man up, took his place at the pan, bat held loosely. Once more Savage kept the ball high and close, and put it over with speed. Like his predecessor, the Tiger backstop bunted a foul.

A wide one followed, which Wurts made no effort to reach. Then came another of those amazing drops, and the batter found himself fooled even as McKnight had been. He failed to strike when the ball cut across his shoulders and breast. An outcurve followed, and was disdained. A moment later, however, he whiffed fruitlessly at a spitter.

"Reckon he's on an even keel again," the southpaw murmured under his breath. "Now, if he

can only put the kibosh on this bird he'll be all right."

Few professional pitchers are good batsmen, but there are exceptions, and Liddell had proved himself one of them. His performance with the stick earlier in the game had been admirable, and he advanced to the plate now with determination written all over his slightly supercilious face.

How he missed the first ball was evidently a puzzle to him. He swung at it as if he felt quite certain of meeting it fairly and squarely, and his failure brought a ludicrous look of surprise to his face.

Savage was not faltering now. He wasted no time, nor did he hurry unduly. He put over a curve which fooled Liddell even more than the first one.

"Great work, old man!" cried Dalton. "You can sure put it on that little old pill to-day."

For an instant the rival twirlers faced each other in silence. Liddell's air of superciliousness had vanished; he was biting his lip as he gripped his stick. Savage still wore that expression of grim determination, but his lids were drooping slightly, and for a second Locke was unpleasantly reminded of the fellow's manner two weeks before, when he had tried the vanishing ball. He thrust the recollection from his mind as the recruit pitched.

Liddell's judgment told him that the ball would cut a corner when it broke. He was not mistaken in thinking it would be good, but instead of crossing the outside corner, it took such a sharp shoot that it barely clipped the inside of the rubber.

"Out!" announced the umpire.

Hurling his bat to the ground, the handsome pitcher strode out to the mound in a very unbecoming state of temper.

Lefty moved a little farther over to intercept Savage, who came slowly in, head bent over the glove he was apparently examining.

"You pulled out of that hole fine, old man," Locke said, as soon as the other was within earshot.

Savage raised his head for an instant, showing a face which was still rather serious. His eyes were perfectly normal, however, and Locke decided that he must still be troubled over that momentary slump.

"Had to," returned the Westerner briefly. "No business to get into it."

Locke smiled. "What was the matter?"

The recruit's eyes dropped again to the glove, which Lefty saw to be ripped along one side.

"Oh, nothing special," he answered vaguely. "Just carelessness, I reckon."

"We all do it now and then," consoled the portsider. "What's up now?" he asked, as Sav-

age passed the bench and headed for one end of the grand stand.

"Going to get another glove," explained the Westerner over his shoulder. "This is on the blink. I've got a good one stowed away in the dressing room."

Locke nodded, pausing by the bench long enough to see his friend reach the end of the stands and disappear through a door leading to a small, rough sort of dressing room occupying part of the space beneath the seats. It was never used for that purpose by the Blue Stocking crowd, who always changed at the hotel, but it made an admirable storage place for bats, balls, spare gloves, and all the other paraphernalia of the game. The southpaw's attention was swiftly recalled to the field, and there it remained for the better part of ten minutes.

Whether or not Liddell's predicted downfall had been hurried by his experience at the bat, or was simply due at this time, there could be no doubt whatever that it had come. The first man up hit him, and those who followed continued the work gleefully. Before another man could be hustled into the box they had made three runs, and ere the pitcher's successor had worked the kinks out of his arm two more were added. The inning ended with the Blue Stockings five tallies in the lead.

"That's more like it," said Dalton, as the visitors came slowly in from the field. "That's the way it ought to be. Come ahead, fellows; we'll hold 'em down this inning, and see if we can't put the blanket on this new pill slinger. Get a move on, Nels."

Lefty turned in time to see Savage rise slowly from the ground a little to one side of the bench, where he had apparently been sitting since his return from the dressing room. As he passed, on his way to the mound, he not only failed to glance at the southpaw or speak a word, but seemed actually to be averting his head.

The unnaturalness of the proceeding at once struck Locke, keyed up as he was by the busher's inexplicable slump in the last inning. An instant later he drew a quick breath as the unmistakable reek of liquor was borne to his nostrils, and he stared after Savage, his face full of deepest apprehension.

"Whew!" he whistled, "the crazy idiot went off to take a drink. Now the deuce is to pay!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE EVIL TRANSITION

SICK at heart, all his recent fears revived, Lefty watched his friend step into the box and prepare to pitch. To the best of his knowledge and belief Savage had not touched liquor for ten days, and his breaking over now seemed to the southpaw like the beginning of the end. Whether it was the cause or effect of that hateful change of personality, Locke did not know; but he always associated drink with the evil side of the busher's character, and he could not now shake off the feeling that the worst was happening.

Savage's first delivery was a swift inshoot that cut a corner of the pan, and was pronounced a strike. He followed it with two coaxers which were disdained. Then came another shoot at which Billy Olds swung in vain, and Lefty was conscious of a growing sense of wonder mingled with that hope which is so hard to kill utterly.

Could it be possible that he had been mistaken? Savage's manner was not what it had been earlier in the game, to be sure. He had lost, in a great

measure, the snap and vim and swiftness of action shown up to now—had become almost irritatingly deliberate. Also, his expression had changed from keen, light-hearted gayety to heavy-lidded somberness. But Locke had never seen the man pitch in a real game before. For all he knew, this might be simply the prelude to a blow-up such as comes to many pitchers at about this stage of a contest. Perhaps he had felt it coming, and resorted to liquor in a desperate effort to brace himself and stave it off.

All of this was unlike the man Locke had come to think so much of, but the southpaw's reluctance to believe the worst made him ready to seize upon any possible explanation. Even when Olds fell upon the next ball handed up and smashed it out for a safety, he did not lose hope. The same thing had happened more than once in each of the previous innings.

Moore, next batsman, hit a slow bounder to Lewis, who made the mistake of waiting for the ball, and was then forced to throw hastily. That throw was wide, and dragged Ogan off the cushion, permitting Moore to make the base by a single stride.

Savage took the ball from Ogan, and turned to glare angrily at the shortstop. His lips moved, and for a moment it seemed as if a burst of heated denunciation would break forth. In another sec-

ond, however, his teeth came together with a snap, and he stepped back into the box, frowning heavily.

"Don't blame him for being sore," muttered Lefty to himself. "If he's on the verge of a blow-up, that sort of thing certainly gets a fellow's goat. Keeping his mouth shut shows he's got some self-control left."

The portsider was further heartened by the manner in which Savage took the next batter in hand. Allaire did his best to bunt, but the pitcher kept the balls high and close, and two fouls resulted, the second of which came down back of third, giving Palsifer an opportunity to make a circus catch.

Unfortunately these encouraging symptoms were of short duration. Locke could not fail to observe that Savage's work became slower and more labored with each delivery. He started by handing "Brick" Forbes two balls in succession. A single strike followed, then another ball, and the pitcher was in a hole.

There was no similarity now to the debonair coolness with which the Westerner had met the same situation several times before. His face was set and tense, the mouth a single gray line. His lids drooped until they seemed almost closed. His wind-up was dragging, as if each movement was an effort.

Forbes swung savagely as the ball came across the pan, lifting a high fly to center.

"Duoro will grab that," murmured Lefty, his eyes following the white spot sailing across the vivid blue. "He can't miss it."

The young fielder had ample time to get under the ball. It looked like a certainty, and the base runners ducked back to their bags. Unfortunately, by one of those inexplicable slips usually caused by overconfidence, the horsehide struck Duoro's mitt and trickled over the edge to the ground.

Olds stretched himself for third, and a sarcastic chorus arose from the infield, in which Locke could plainly distinguish the voice of Savage, raised in a roar of fury. Olds made his base, getting there ahead of Duoro's throw.

The damage was done.

Still growling inarticulately, his face an angry crimson, Savage sent over a ball which the captain of the Tigers lined out for a two-bagger, scoring Olds and Moore. Sam Vogt fell on the second ball pitched to him, smashing out a line drive between second and short. Laughing Larry pulled off a marvelous mid-air catch, following it with some ground flipflaps, from which he recovered in time to make a throw to the plate that nailed Forbes in an attempt to score after the pill was captured.

Lefty drew a long breath and glanced sidewise at Kennedy, who had scarcely stirred during the entire inning. The manager's face was dark, but, beyond the fact that he was far from pleased at the progress of events, his expression told nothing.

The southpaw's troubled gaze veered swiftly back to the figure of the busher moving slowly toward the bench. In spite of what he had been trying to make himself believe—that this was simply the natural manner of a man struggling against an inevitable breakdown—there was dread in his heart, which increased swiftly as he studied that forbidding face with its lowering brows, drooping lids, and twitching lips.

Savage came straight on, head bent, slapping his glove at intervals against his thigh. He passed Lefty without as much as a glance, heading for a point a little to one side of the bench. The portsider stepped forward. The continued suspense was growing intolerable. He must know, one way or another, how matters stood.

"Brace up, old man, and don't take it so seriously," he said, with forced lightness. "We all make a bull now and then."

Like a flash the fellow whirled on him with a movement which suggested the sudden snapping of hardly won self-control.

"Bull!" he snarled, his eyes gleaming through narrow slits. "That's what you call it, is it? Let

me tell you this, Locke: I don't want any of your sympathy. You can save that for those bonehead friends of yours who play ball like a bunch of bushers. What's more, you can keep out of my way from now on. I told you once before that I didn't like your brand, and I meant it. I pick my friends, and you're not one of 'em, nor ever will be. Get me?"

His eyes were wide open now, and from their baleful, evil depths came a gleam of bitter hatred which sent a sickening sense of failure surging over the man on whom they rested for a second before Savage turned and walked away.

Lefty had found out what he wanted to know. His efforts to stave off this moment had been without avail. The evil transition had come again. The very worst had happened.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE LAST STRAW

IT was the shock of having his hopes dashed so utterly and completely that made Locke oblivious for a moment to Savage's insolence. But swiftly the sting of the uncalled-for insult brought the color flaming into his face, and made him leap forward in mingled anger and sorrow.

"Savage! Savage!" he called sharply. But the busher did not heed him.

A touch on his arm cut off further action abruptly. Glancing round, he found Kennedy beside him.

"Get busy and warm up," ordered the manager briefly.

Locke hesitated an instant, his eyes searching the older man's face. The manager was evidently in no mood for conversation. He wheeled and marched over to the coaching line, leaving the pitcher to hunt up a glove, root out Babe Torrey, the change catcher, and proceed to a retired spot.

Their unexpected success in the first half of the inning seemed to put new heart into the Tigers.

Though Liddell's successor was hit several times, fine support prevented those hits from being effective. As the visitors trotted in from the field, Lefty loped over to where Kennedy was standing.

"Want me now?" he asked.

The manager shook his head. "Not just yet. I'm going to give this bird one more chance. Buzz around. You may have to go in any time."

The manager was evidently bitterly disappointed over the behavior of the man he had lauded so highly a little while before, and was probably hoping against hope that he would pull up before the final smash. But the person going out to the mound now held nothing in common with the Savage who had pitched so brilliantly up to the previous innings. They were as unlike as two different beings.

Lefty moved back and continued his warming up with Torrey, pausing at intervals to follow the progress of events on the diamond. He had worked conscientiously while the Blue Stockings were at bat to put his pegging arm into condition, but now his efforts became desultory and intermittent, serving no more than to ward off any possible chill. He kept the ball in motion between himself and Torrey, but it was a mechanical sort of business which showed how absorbed he was in watching Savage.

The change in the latter had become more strik-

ing. He seemed to have thrown aside the efforts he had previously made to conceal his condition, and lapsed into the man Locke had known and detested in the early days of training. He strolled into the box, his lips curling with that old air of insolent condescension, as if he had little or no interest in the proceeding, and was only there in the performance of a not very highly regarded duty.

Locke tried to tell himself that his growing irritation, threatening to become anger he could not bridle, was unjust to the busher's other—and, he believed, normal—self which he had liked so well; but it was all to no purpose. The evil personality of Savage was so strong, so dominant, above all so antagonistic, that the southpaw presently forgot everything save the intense dislike it raised within him.

McKnight, the first batter up, opened the inning with a single off the second ball delivered by the Westerner. Alec Wurts, who followed, seemed to have no difficulty whatever in picking out one that suited him, dumping it into the diamond. He took his medicine at first, while McKnight advanced to second.

"That's the game!' called McCormick from the coaching line. "This guy's all in, boys! We'll have the blanket on him in two shakes."

Earlier in the day Savage had shown remark-

able skill in preventing bunts, or else had used them to his own advantage. The contrast presented by his careless, slipshod work now was too striking to escape general notice, and Locke was not surprised to see Larry Dalton hurry across the diamond and touch Savage on the arm. The portsider was too far away to hear what was said, but he saw the busher roughly shake off Larry's hand and snap out something which brought an angry sparkle to the captain's eyes and a tart rejoinder from his lips.

The reprimand evidently had little effect. Within two minutes Kent, who had replaced Buck Liddell, reached first on a single. McKnight was stopped at third; but, with only one out and the crack hitters coming up, things looked more than encouraging for the visiting team.

"Might as well hand 'em the game, and be done with it!" was the disgusted comment of Babe Torrey, scarcely audible above the racket made by various Tiger coaches. "Why the deuce don't Jack take him out?"

Lefty shrugged his shoulders. He had been keeping an eye on Kennedy, but the manager had not even glanced in his direction.

When Olds squared himself at the rubber, alert and fairly quivering with eagerness, Lefty and the change catcher, with one accord, abandoned their languid tossing of the ball, and faced the

diamond. Both felt that the next few seconds would see something doing.

"He'll knock the coating off the pill unless that fellow takes a brace," muttered Torrey.

Locke had little hope that the brace would come. Savage's expression of careless insolence was unaltered. One might have supposed him a bored spectator, for all the interest he showed. How any sane human being could make such an exhibition was beyond comprehension.

Not only were the first two balls pitched wide of the plate, but the third almost escaped Dirk Nelson's clutches, and made him mutter under his breath as he saw Kent scampering to second, with the sack already safely purloined.

Then came a pause—a curious, tense pause. Watching Savage, Lefty had an odd feeling that the man was aware all at once that he had gone too far. He flashed a single swift glance around the diamond, and moistened his lips. When he faced the batter again, it was with a determined shake of the shoulders and a quick jerk at the visor of his cap that brought it down over his eyes.

Slowly, deliberately, Savage kicked away an imaginary pebble, but without glancing downward. Like a statue, he stood poised, leaning forward slightly. For no single instant did his intent gaze leave the batter's face.

Suddenly Lefty realized what was coming "He's going to try the vanishing-ball stunt!" he said under his breath.

Would it work this time? The southpaw felt his pulse quicken; his eyes began to smart with the intensity of his stare. Would the man never pitch? Slowly—very slowly—the arm drew back, paused, and at last shot forward, projecting the sphere straight over the heart of the pan.

Before the ball had reached the plate Lefty knew the attempt had failed. The bat came round with every ounce of the big man's muscle behind it. There was that sharp, ringing crack which sends a thrill through every fan, and the horsehide soared out over the infield—on, on, climbing higher and higher.

Duoro and Joe Welsh both whirled and raced toward the fence. The diamond instantly resounded with the shouts of coachers urging on the circling base runners. The Blue Stocking infielders stood dejectedly, hands on hips, following with their eyes the progress of that little dot of gray.

It was falling now. Faster and faster it dropped in a wide arc which would carry it well beyond the laboring fielders. At last it vanished beyond the fence. The voice of Jack Kennedy promptly sounded above the racket made by the jubilating Tigers:

"Get off the field! Yes, I mean *you*—bonehead! Don't lose any time about it! Locke, get busy!'

As Lefty passed the manager, Kennedy's angry voice, pitched in a much lower key, followed him:

"Hope to thunder you're satisfied with your experiment!"

Old Jack rarely lost his temper, nor was he the sort to taunt a man because of mistakes. He did both now, and Lefty could not blame him.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BREAKING A BATTING STREAK

WITH that trained sense of observation which Big League players develop to its highest point of efficiency, Locke had noted the strength and weakness of each Tiger batter, even while his mind was more or less occupied with a study of Nels Savage. Now, to begin with, he forced Moore to foul twice in rapid succession.

With two strikes and no balls declared, the portsider did his best to lead the Tiger batter into reaching. But Moore, evidently having a good eye, was not to be fooled, and three balls were called.

"Take a walk, Irish!" urged McCormick.

Lefty had no intention of walking anybody. He sent over a swift inshoot, which, observation had told him, was as distasteful as any ball to this really exceptional hitter. Moore was ready for it this time, unfortunately, and he cracked out a grounder that Lewis reached with difficulty. It seemed to scorch Lewis' fingers, and he fumbled. When he recovered the slippery sphere, his throw

was so hurried that it pulled Ogan off the sack, giving Moore "a life."

Instantly the Tiger coaches opened up. But their racket affected the southpaw not a particle. Cool and undisturbed, he continued his work in the box, luring Allaire in to swinging at the first ball over—an elusive curve.

But the hitting germ seemed to be coursing in the veins of the Tigers. With two and three called on him, the batter finally forced Lefty to put the ball over, then lifted it into left field.

It looked as if Joe Welsh had a good chance to get the fly and Moore hesitated on the line, part way down from first, ready to duck back to the bag in time to prevent a double play.

Welsh seemed to stumble a bit just as he was reaching for the sphere. He dropped it.

Moore got away for second like a flash. Welsh made a swift recovery of the ball and lined it unerringly into Dalton's hands, but the runner beat it to the "anchorage." Still Lefty was undisturbed. Not even when Dalton missed stopping a hot liner by what seemed the fraction of an inch, and the bases were filled, did Locke show a sign of worry or irritation. But his jaw hardened a little, and that characteristic expression of stubborn determination his team-mates knew so well came into his face.

He was working with deliberation, and, though

he did not seem to watch the bases, the Tigers swiftly learned that it was extremely hazardous to take much of a lead. It puzzled them not a little, for they could detect no signals between catcher and pitcher. They were up against one of the minor phases of inside ball. The infield's code of signals was well-nigh perfect, and impossible of detection by ordinary outside players.

The first ball to McCormick was a trifle wide. Lefty caught it on the return and seemed about to pitch, but, instead, without the slightest warning, whirled, and threw to second, where Dalton had been edging in. Allaire dived back barely in time, after which he took a smaller lead.

Locke's next pitched ball was a queer little wobbler, lacking speed though delivered with a snap that seemed to promise smoke. The batter saw that it would come over, but his impatience to hit seemed to overbalance his judgment. He struck too soon, popping a little fly which Locke caught without moving from his tracks. Like a flash, he put the ball over to third; but Moore, warned by Allaire's narrow escape, had remained in the vicinity of the cushion, and managed to get back in time.

"That's the way to stop 'em, old man!" called Dalton encouragingly. "Take this rube into camp."

Sam Vogt was no mean hitter. Lefty had sized

him up as one of the most dangerous on the visiting team, for the reason that he had a fine eye, a powerful swing, and few weaknesses.

One of the latter, however, was an evident distaste for a dead slow ball, and that was the sort first handed up by the portsider. Waiting with steady nerves, Vogt saw that it would not cross the plate, and declined to go after it.

He swung at the next one, however—a sharp drop which he simply fouled.

"Give him another like that," urged McCormick. "He'll take the peeling off it!"

Lefty smiled good-humoredly, and whipped over a high smoker. It proved to be too high, however, and there was some joyous cackling from the coachers. When Locke followed this up by still another wide one they felt that the famous southpaw had been much overrated, and jubilated loudly.

"Take one, Sam!" advised the captain. "Let him force a run."

Lefty's judgment told him that the batter would follow instructions unless he saw that the ball was certain to come over the center of the pan. He consequently laid one carefully over the inside corner, and Vogt let it pass.

"Strike—two!" called the umpire.

There came a momentary pause, hushed and tense. A second later the ball came hissing from

Locke's fingers with a burning speed surpassing anything he had yet known. It took a sharp hop just before it reached the pan, and Vogt's bat slashed empty air.

Lefty had stopped a dangerous batting streak and prevented further scoring.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE VOODOO CHARM

THE crucial point of the game had been in that first half of the eighth. Before the inning was over the Blue Stockings had discovered the weak points of the substitute pitcher, and hammered out three runs. In the beginning of the ninth Locke proved invincible on the slab, and the game ended with the Big Leaguers in very good humor again.

Lefty glanced curiously about for Savage. The busher was nowhere to be seen, so the southpaw led the crowd at a lope back to the hotel. Turning into Main Street, he saw ahead of him the lanky figure of Kennedy, striding along at a speed plainly evincing some fixed purpose. He had left the field before the finish of the game. That in itself was significant.

"Something doing," murmured Locke.

Quickening his pace, he entered the lobby almost on the manager's heels. The first person his eyes rested on was Savage, lounging against the desk, a half-smoked cigarette dangling from

one corner of his mouth. Kennedy walked straight up to him.

"You can pack up," he said. "There's a train out at three. Don't miss it. If you're hanging around this town to-morrow there'll be something happen that you won't forget. Get me?"

The busher exhaled a cloud of smoke and surveyed Kennedy defiantly from under drooping lids.

"I ought to," he drawled. "You talk loud enough. Supposin' I don't care about leaving? You don't happen to own this hotel, and—"

Half the witnesses thought the manager was going to knock Savage down. The look upon Kennedy's face must have awed the insolent man, for he hesitated an instant before adding slowly:

"Oh, very well. I hadn't any idea of staying. I was just interested in finding out how far you'd go."

He took a step or two toward the stairs; then with the lithe quickness of a panther, whirled and strode over to Lefty. The latter's muscles tensed, ready for an attack. Savage stopped abruptly, scarcely a foot away, and thrust out his face until his baleful, hate-filled eyes were separated from Locke's only by inches.

"Maybe you think you've pulled off a clever stunt in getting me fired," he said in a voice that

quivered with passion. "But I'm going to get you, and get you good and plenty!"

"Why don't you start something?" Lefty invited. "So far you've managed to duck every time. Just kick in now, and see what happens."

"Too easy!" sneered the busher. "I'll play the game my own way, and I'll put it across on you, bet your sweet life!"

Wheeling, he hurried toward the narrow hallway out of which the stairs led. As he turned the corner, he collided with a negro boy just coming through the door.

"Get outa my way!" he snarled.

A blow of his open hand sent the boy spinning, and Savage passed on, leaving behind a feeling as if a tornado had swept through the lobby.

For a second the negro cowered against the wall. Then, with a frightened whimper, he ran straight for Lefty, catching the southpaw's sweater tightly in both hands.

"Doan let him git me, mistah!" he gasped, his voice shaking with fright. "Doan let him tech me! Ah'll done be turn inter a stone, or suthin'! Ah—Ah knows dat man, mistah! He—he am de dibbil hisself—wif horns!"

A glance only was needed to show that the boy was half crazed with fear. His face had turned a mottled gray, his eyes rolled, his teeth were chattering like castanets. Locke put aside an im-

pulse to get after Savage and chastise him then and there, and gave his attention to calming the negro.

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I won't let him touch you." A sudden recollection brought a glint of curiosity into his eyes. "You're new in the hotel, aren't you?" he went on. "How do you come to know anything about that man?"

"Ah—Ah knowed him 'fo' I cum hyer, boss," was the hesitating reply.

By this time Dalton, Ogan, Jack Stillman, and several others had gathered around. Lefty glanced at the reporter, with uplifted eyebrows, and turned swiftly back to the boy.

"Where was that?" he asked. "Tell us about it. You needn't be afraid of him," he added, as the boy glanced fearfully toward the stairs. "He's going away from here in a hurry."

"Dat ain't nuffin'," sighed the boy. "He put de ebil eye on me jes' de same." His eyes grew round and large; his voice sank to an awed whisper: "He's frien's wif ole Mammy Bunce, ober de ribber. She done give him a voodoo chahm. Wif dat an' his ebil eye he do anythin' he want. He make a hoss jump clean across de ribber. Ya-yassir, he done it."

"What!" ejaculated Lefty, in amused surprise. "Why, you young sinner, you—"

"Fo' de Lawd, mistah, thass gospel!" protested the boy earnestly. "Ah done seen him do it. Ah was ridin' Marse Liv'mo's roan to de blacksmif along down ribber—de hoss Mistah Tet'ridge want fo' to buy. Marse Liv'more wouldn't go fo' to sell nohow, an'—"

"Tethridge!" interrupted Locke suddenly "Who's he?"

"He am de gemman dat's train' hosses for de big race over to Marse Liv'mo's."

Lefty's eyes narrowed the least bit as he remembered that the name of the Englishman who had been Savage's companion that wintry day on the train was Tethridge. He also recalled something Dalton had said about an Englishman who was entering a couple of horses in the race at the county seat two days hence. It began to seem as if there might be points of interest in the boy's fantastic tale.

"All right," he said briefly. "Go ahead."

"Ah was ridin' de roan down ribber," resumed the youth, "when Ah meet up wif dat man. Ah see him at Mammy Bunce once, an' Ah was pow'ful sca't. When he stop an' look at me wif dem debbil eyes, Ah was sca't worse. He say to me: 'Boy, dat hoss am gwine to jump across de ribber; better git off.' But Ah's so sca't Ah jes' couldn't move noways. Den he comes up close, his eyes gettin' bigger an' bigger, lak dey was gwine jump

out'n his haid an' bite me. Woo! He doan' say nothin' mo', but I git outa de saddle an' he jump on. Seems lak Ah couldn't do nothin' but jes' stan' dere an' watch him. He rid straight down to de ribber, an' jab de roan wif his heels, an'—whiff!—over de ribber dey goes, clean to de odder side—one jump!"

A snicker went round the circle, and several of the men lounged off, chuckling at the boy's infinite capacity for lying. Dalton and Stillman remained with Locke, however, to see if there might be any further developments.

"And when you woke up the horse was gone?" Lefty inquired skeptically.

"Yassah. Ah's jes' tellin' you-all dat he jump de ribber."

"Are you sure he jumped, or did you only dream it? How about the tracks? Did they lead down to the water?"

"Ah—Ah didn't stop fo' to look. Ah's so sca't dat man might come back Ah jes' run an' run. Ah didn't dare go back to Marse Liv'mo's wifout no hoss, so I hangs aroun' down to Holt Ferry fo' right long time, an' den comes up hyer, an' Majah Hol'cum done hire me."

"How long ago did this happen?" inquired Lefty.

"Ah doan rightly 'member, boss, but Ah reckon close on three weeks—mebbe fo'."

Locke hesitated an instant, his face thoughtful. Then he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"All right, Snowball," he said carelessly. "Chase yourself, and don't worry about this devil of yours. We won't let him swallow you."

With a voluble burst of thanks, the boy scuttled out of the room. Locke turned back to his two companions.

"Some imagination there, eh?" chuckled Dalton.

"Wish I knew what it was founded on," muttered the reporter thoughtfully. "He's evidently met Savage somewhere, and has been thoroughly scared. Do you suppose that blackguard could really have stolen a horse, Lefty? Of course that jumping-the-river stuff is all bunk, but it looks to me as if the kid had been hypnotized by our two-sided friend."

"Oh, I guess he's quite equal to anything," the southpaw returned. "Between three and four weeks ago would place it just before the training season opened, and make it possible for him to be there. Moreover, this Tethridge, who was so anxious to buy the roan, was chumming with Savage the first time I laid eyes on the latter up North. You can take that for what it's worth, Jack."

"Jove!" exclaimed the newspaper man, his eyes brightening. "Looks as if there might be more to that Arabian Nights tale than you'd think at

first. Isn't it up to us to find out from Livermore whether the horse was stolen, and—"

"You can do anything you like, but cut me out." Locke's tone was a bit heated. "I'm sick of the sound of the name of Savage. I'd be thankful if I knew I was never going to hear it again. What's more, with the bunch moving on so soon, I haven't the least intention of getting mixed up in any criminal cases and being held here for weeks, perhaps."

He wheeled and made for the stairs without further delay, leaving Dalton and the reporter alone.

"Right off the bat!" the former grinned. "Say, Jack, what about that voodoo dope the kid was giving us? Anything to it?"

"You've got me," said Stillman. "I happen to know that there is an old black woman across the river with a reputation for holding talkfests with his satanic majesty. Whether Savage kicked into the game or not I can't say." They turned to follow the southpaw. "I reckon Lefty's right about it," he went on regretfully; "but after what he did to-day I'd certainly like to put that Savage proposition where he couldn't play anything but solitaire for a while."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN THE NIGHT

THE Holcombe House was a low, rambling, typical country hotel such as one sees in many small towns throughout the Southern States. A wide veranda, much frequented on balmy nights and sultry afternoons, stretched across the entire front of the main building, its sloping roof surmounted by a long row of bedroom windows, monotonously alike.

By half past ten the lobby was generally deserted save perhaps for a lone drummer making out his report, or a chance friend of the major chatting with him in the little office behind the desk. At twelve, precisely, the courtly, old-fashioned proprietor followed his invariable custom of shutting up, and retired to his private rooms on the southwest corner of the second floor. Half an hour after midnight the place was tight as a drum.

After a long day of hard work in the open, the Blue Stockings were usually quite ready for bed at ten o'clock, and this night was no exception. Lefty and Larry Dalton were among the first to

go, and by a quarter after the hour they were stretched between the blankets in the room they occupied together, next to Major Holcombe's.

The southpaw slept soundly, but not heavily. Any unusual noise was likely to arouse him. Consequently he was not surprised, a little later, to find himself sitting bolt upright in the darkness, listening in bewilderment to unwonted sounds that seemed to come through one of the open windows. There was an irregular thumping, a muffled crash, the dull pad-pad as of shoeless feet, then a voice raised in anger.

A second later, as his brain cleared, Lefty realized that a struggle of some sort was going on in the next room. This brought him out of bed with a single bound. Gripping the shoulder of the still-slumbering Dalton and giving him a shake, he ran over to the window, thrust up the screen, and slid out on to the veranda roof.

The major's nearest window, not two feet away, was wide open, and as Locke threw one leg over the sill he heard a dull, muffled thud, followed by the heavy crash of a body falling. For a fraction of a second he feared that he had come too late. Then the major's voice, panting and somewhat shrill with excitement, came to him out of the blackness:

"Keep back, yo' ruffian, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

"Don't shoot, major!" exclaimed Lefty as he dropped into the room. "It's Locke. Do you need any help?"

There was a brief pause, followed by the click of a switch, and the room leaped into brilliancy, revealing a curious scene. Major Holcombe, tall, lean, and lanker than ever in his abbreviated night-shirt, stood against the wall, one hand gripping an old-fashioned service revolver. His gray hair, left long at the sides to be brushed across the thin spot on top, was mussed and disheveled. He was breathing a little unevenly, and there were hectic spots on his high cheek bones. But his black eyes flashed as he stared at Locke across the body of a man huddled against the foot of the bed.

"I—thank yo', suh," he said at last, a touch of the old stateliness in his manner. "Your promptness does yo' credit, suh, but I seem to have settled fo' the scoundrel. A clear case of breakin' and enterin' combined with murderous assault, suh. The ruffian had a gun, which I was fawtunate enough to knock out of his hand; otherwise I should probably not be heah to tell the tale. I shall call yo' gentlemen to witness"—by this time Dalton had appeared in the window, and was staring in with bewildered, sleep-muddled eyes—"that I was obliged to strike him down in—"

He broke off abruptly with a whistling gasp, and stared downward. With an inarticulate grunt,

the man on the floor stirred and rolled over, revealing the flushed face of Nelson Savage. There was a slight cut on his forehead, but the reek of liquor in the air gave Locke an impression that the fellow's collapse had been caused as much by drink as by the glancing blow from the major's revolver. With Savage in normal condition, the old Southerner would have stood no chance at all.

"You!" exclaimed Major Holcombe, straightening up. "So!"

He turned to Lefty, his lips set, his lean jaw tightening. "This is a case fo' the sheriff, suh," he said coldly. "The scoundrel evidently wanted revenge fo' havin' been turned out of my hotel. If you will look after him until I can make a hasty toilet, I shall be obliged."

He thrust his antiquated weapon into Locke's hand, and, gathering up an armful of clothes, stalked into a rear room. Lefty stared thoughtfully at the unconscious man for a moment, then glanced at Dalton.

"Revenge," he murmured thoughtfully; "I wonder if that was it—and he mistook the window?"

"Thunder! You mean he was after you?"

"Why not? I told you how he ranted down in the lobby this afternoon, and you can see he's more than half seas over. It would be a simple matter for a man in that condition to mistake the

second window from the corner for the third, especially when they're so close together."

"The scoundrel!" exclaimed Dalton, his face darkening. "I hope— He's coming round."

The southpaw turned to see his enemy struggle to a sitting posture and stare slowly around the room. His eyes were only half open, but as they came to rest on Locke's legs, clad in silk pajamas, they widened, and his gaze traveled swiftly upward to Lefty's face.

"Didn' git yer, but I will yet!" he snarled in half-drunken fury. "If I don't make you—"

"Stop!" ordered Lefty, his patience utterly exhausted. "Another word out of you, and I'll put a gag in your mouth."

The busher promptly let out a stream of unprintable abuse. Locke as promptly stuffed the end of a towel into his mouth, securing it firmly in place with a necktie Larry brought from the other room. Another towel was used to tie the man's hands, and Savage was reduced to a helpless condition.

Looking more like himself, the major presently returned, his mood of cold, determined indignation unchanged. He had been humiliated and outraged, and the person responsible was going to suffer the full penalties of the law. As a precaution, Kennedy was roused, and informed of

what had happened; but he refused to see the recruit, much less interfere in his behalf.

"Let him go to jail, where he belongs," he said grimly.

Savage was presently carried off by the sheriff, defiant to the last.

When the Blue Stockings departed, late the next afternoon, for Webster, to play an exhibition game at the big county fair, the prisoner was behind bars awaiting trial on charges which could scarcely fail to land him in the penitentiary for a prolonged stay.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE FACE IN THE CROWD

THE game at Webster was scheduled for the morning in order not to interfere with the horse race at two P. M. The latter was the big event of the fair; but the presence of an organization like the famous Blue Stockings naturally attracted a goodly portion of the big crowd which had come in from miles around.

Kennedy's squad looked upon the occasion as more or less of a lark, and were interested in it mainly because of the opportunity it brought to witness the race. But they found the team from Savannah a snappy bunch, and it was only by really hard work that they pulled out winners by a score of four to one.

Pink Dillon pitched for six innings, and was succeeded by Lefty. The latter had not been in the box five minutes before he noticed a waving handkerchief from one of the lower rows of the grand stand. Looking closer, he was astonished and overjoyed to see Janet Harting and Celia Berkeley smiling down on him.

He had received two letters from Janet since

her departure from Tulane. Both were written in the old, friendly style, which made Locke hope and believe that she had forgotten the disagreement that had spoiled their last evening together; but in neither letter had she hinted at a possibility of their meeting so soon.

"Another surprise, I reckon," murmured the southpaw as he doffed his cap and stared searchingly at the girls' escorts. "Or maybe they came on the spur of the moment. Wonder who she's got with her?"

A second later his heart sank, and even his slightly jealous speculation concerning the identity of the good-looking man at Janet's right was swept from his mind. He would have to face Celia Berkeley! Worse than that, he would be obliged to tell her what had happened to Savage. He fairly squirmed at the thought.

There was a smile on her lips, and her laughing eyes were gazing around the field. She was looking for the man, of course, wondering, probably, why he had not shown himself. How could he tell her the truth?

In his troubled abstraction, Lefty put over a ball which the Savannah batter fell on with violent delight, smashing it out for a two-bagger. The accident brought Locke up sharply, and for the remainder of the game he kept his mind strictly on business.

He had no more idea, as he hurried toward the stands after the ninth, of how to break the unpleasant news than when the necessity for it first burst upon him. Striving to hide his discomfort, he pushed through the crowd to where the girls stood, and greeted them warmly. The escorts proved to be Miss Berkeley's two brothers—good-looking young fellows—who would have appealed instantly to Lefty had his mind not been absorbed with the disagreeable duty before him.

"We only decided to come last night," the Southern girl explained, in answer to Locke's question. "We wanted to, of course, the minute we heard you-all were to be here; but Ted and Billy couldn't tell definitely about getting off till yesterday afternoon. But where's Nels? Didn't he come?"

It was impossible to tell her here in the crowd, so the southpaw hedged.

"No," he answered. "You see, Jack didn't bring the whole squad"—which happened to be quite true—"and Nels was one of those left behind."

"How mean!" pouted the girl. "That manager of yours must be a regular old bear."

To Lefty's relief, she asked no further questions, but at once began a discussion concerning lunch. They had motored over, it seemed, and brought a large hamper with them, the contents

of which Lefty Locke was invited to share. Thankful for the temporary respite, the portsider hustled off to dress, accompanied by Ted Berkeley, while the others sought their machine.

The ordeal he was dreading did not come during the informal meal. At half past one the pitcher found himself beside Janet in a box that must have cost real money to secure at so short a notice, with the disagreeable task still before him.

Directly opposite them was the judges' stand, and Locke had scarcely taken his seat before he became aware of a small-sized disturbance going on in that direction. A tall, erect old gentleman with iron-gray hair and a nose like the beak of a hawk stood against the stand, his hands behind the back of his long frock coat. Beside him were several other less noticeable men—officials, if one could judge from the ribbons on their lapels—while about them was a circle of some two dozen nondescript persons, attracted evidently by the dispute; for the track had not yet been cleared, and people were crossing it in every direction.

The eyes of each member of the little group were fixed intently on the small, wiry little man who stood before the gray-haired judge, rage and indignation mirrored in his keen, narrow face, emphasizing each remark by the slap of a clenched fist against an open palm.

"I tell you, colonel," Lefty heard him assert,

"that mare is a ringer! I know it! I can prove it! She's got a record, she has! She ran in the race for the Maxworth Cup over the line last September, under the name of Princess. She was a sorrel then, with a white fetlock, and a white crescent on her off flank. She's a sorrel now underneath the dye this faker soaked on to turn her into a bay, and—"

"One moment, suh!" The colonel lifted an impressive hand. "Yo' are making serious charges, Mistah Baxby. Steve, run ovah an' fetch Tethridge. He left heah not two minutes ago."

One of the men hustled off, and Baxby, finding that the judge turned a deaf ear to his monologue, began to pour out his woes to the crowd of curious onlookers, which increased with every passing minute. He gave the date of the race, the fact that Tethridge had been the owner of the winning horse, and various other details in such a positive manner that Locke, becoming convinced that he was speaking the truth, waited for the Englishman's appearance, with a smile of grim anticipation.

After considerable delay, Lefty discerned the attendant returning. Beside him was the lean, lank, rather awkward figure of a man with a slouching gait and a thin, hard, weather-beaten face. The pitcher had no difficulty in recog-

nizing this individual as the same Tethridge whose slurs on professional baseball had once roused his ire.

As the Englishman came closer, a certain veiled anxiety almost hidden beneath an overassured manner, made Locke wonder if the attendant, inadvertently or otherwise, had not put the fellow on guard.

Pushing through the rapidly increasing crowd of people, Tethridge paused before the judge. "Well, old chap," he drawled, "what might be the trouble?"

The colonel cleared his throat and bent a searching gaze on the man, which was returned without the tremor of an eyelash.

"A serious charge has just been made against yo', suh," explained the official. "Mistah Baxby heah asserts that the mare yo' have entered under the name of Alice Gray is a—ah—ringer, suh. He claims that she won the Maxworth Cup under the name of Princess."

"He's a bally liar!" retorted Tethridge, drawing himself up. "Princess is a sorrel with white mawkings. Blimy—I ought to know! I only sold the blooming mare a fortnight since."

"Who'd you sell her to?" shrilled Baxby. "Produce the owner—I dare you! Produce the bill of sale! You can't do it! Because why? She's over there in the stable this minute, daubed

up with dye! A bit of acid will show up the fake, you crook!"

By this time the space about the judges' stand was packed with people, jostling, shoving, and surging back and forth as they tried to get a place in the inner circle to see what was going on. Some one raised a cry of "ringer," and it spread like wildfire, echoing in a chorus about the track. Others came running; the people in the boxes and seats stood up to see and hear better. The whole affair reminded Lefty suddenly of a brimming powder keg waiting for the spark. He was just congratulating himself that the girls were not down there in that seething mob when all at once a new actor entered upon the scene.

He was a burly fellow of thirty-five or so, and he came tearing up the track, dragging by the arm a wizen colored boy, roughly dressed, and evidently frightened half out of his wits. Straight at the crowd the man launched himself, boring a hole with his big shoulders, heedless of angry protestations from those he was shoving aside. At last he burst into the inner, much diminished space—the boy popping after him like a seed squeezed from an orange—and glared around.

"There you are!" he roared, in a voice which rose even above the din. "You dog!" He shook his fist under the Englishman's nose, and Teth-

ridge shrank back to the edge of the narrow circle. "I'm going to beat up that face of yours so your own mother won't know you!" He whirled toward the judge. "Kunnel, my horse is gone lame!"

An uneasy quiver eddied through the crowd. Voices took up the news, adding the name of the horse which had so unexpectedly failed at the last moment. Freckles couldn't run—he was out of the race. Freckles was evidently a favorite, for instantly men by the dozen flung themselves out of the mob and tore over to the betting shed.

The noise increased. Lefty, bending over the edge of the box, could see the colonel's lips move, but heard no sound. Tethridge, his ruddy color gone, shrank behind the officials, passing a limp hand across a shining forehead. Gesticulating wildly, the big, black-haired man continued to shout out his story. Though Locke missed a word here and there, he heard enough, thanks to that bull-like voice, to understand what it was all about.

Tethridge had evidently tried to bribe the stableboy to prevent his master's horse—the favorite above all other entries—from running. Not daring to take the risk, the boy refused; but threats or bribes, or both, sealed his lips. Not an hour before, Tethridge had been in the stable with a friend, who had diverted the attention of

the trainer long enough for the Englishman to slip into the favorite's stall and out again. When the horse was led out he limped badly, and examination revealed a cut muscle which would take months to heal, if, indeed, a cure could ever be accomplished. No one had actually seen it done, but that was unnecessary.

The recital proved to be that spark which Lefty had been expecting. With a roar, the crowd surged forward.

A gasp arose from the stands. Women screamed and turned their backs. For a second Locke expected to see the man torn to pieces before his eyes. But at this juncture Colonel Arlington gave an exhibition of strategic maneuvering which proved his early training. With a single sweep of his arm, he flung Tethridge against the foot of the narrow steps leading up into the judges' stand. In another second he whipped out a large revolver and held the crowd at bay until the terror-stricken man and the various officials had climbed into the stand. Once safely up there, with the colonel and his revolver at the top of the steps, the mob might surge and eddy and roar around the base of the structure without doing a particle of harm.

It did not even come to that. Almost immediately, now that the cause of their excitement had been spirited out of reach, the units of the mob

began to lapse into individuals, and realize how foolish they had been. In rapidly increasing numbers they slipped away, some spurred by the necessity of rearranging their bets, until at last the crowd had shrunk to a size easily handled by officials and policemen hurrying up.

From his seat in the box, Lefty smiled grimly as he watched the white and terrified Tethridge, cowering behind the railing of the stand.

"And you're the man who called professional baseball crooked!" he murmured to himself. "I wonder—"

He stopped abruptly, gripping the arms of his chair spasmodically. Unaccountably his gaze had shifted to the fair-sized crowd still thronging about the foot of the judges' stand. He found himself staring down into the upturned face of Nelson Savage!

CHAPTER XL

BEWILDERING FACTS

IT was but a momentary glimpse, for the crowd, seized with a panic at the approach of a number of policemen, fled in a body, and the busher was whirled out of sight in an instant. But it was enough. Locke knew that face too well to be mistaken. It was Savage—the man he had left sixty miles away behind iron bars, with no chance of a trial within the week at least.

The thing was incredible. It was on a par with that fantastic story of the jumping horse, and for a moment Locke felt his brain reeling. He pulled himself together to answer a question of Janet, then set about reasoning it out more calmly.

There must be some natural explanation, of course. The fellow was here in Webster. That much was beyond any doubt. There were only two possible ways of his getting out of jail—either he had broken out, or in some inexplicable manner he had been released. The southpaw found it difficult to understand how either of these things could have happened. After a most un-

easy ten minutes, he excused himself, and left the box to seek a long-distance telephone.

He had some difficulty in getting the Tulane jail, but when he finally did so the connection was so good that he recognized at once the voice of Joe Warren, the assistant keeper, an ardent fan who had spent most of his off hours at the ball park.

"Joe, this is Locke," Lefty said quickly. "I wanted to ask you about Savage. Is he—still there?"

"Here!" The man's voice vibrated over the wire with sudden shrillness. "I should say nit! The old man chased him as far as the station, and then lost him. Reckon he must have jumped the fast freight that went through a couple of minutes before."

Locke's eyes narrowed. The explanation was very simple, after all.

"Broke out, did he?"

"You bet! Lord knows how he done it, but he cut his way through the roof of the calaboose. Couldn't even wait till dark, an' of course he was seen. It ain't twenty minutes since old Mose Peters piped him climbing through the hole he made, an'—"

"What?"

"I say, it ain't more'n twenty minutes ago that he broke out. Mose Peters lives in that—"

"But that's impossible!" protested Lefty dazedly. "Stop kidding, Joe, and tell me the story straight."

"I ain't kidding!" Warren's voice took on a slightly injured tone. "It might be twenty-five minutes by now, but not a second more. Peters seen him through his back winder, an' hustled over as fast as his rheumatics would let him. Bob took it on the run without even waitin' for his hat. Got a glimpse of the feller duckin' out of Main Street toward the station, but that was the last he seen of him. By hard runnin', he jest about had time to hook on to the freight above the station, an' that's what we reckon he done. I ain't seen Bob since. He 'phoned from the station for me to send down his hat an' gun, an' that's when I heard about it. I hadn't no more'n hung up before you rung."

Lefty drew a long breath, and passed one hand dazedly across his forehead. Visions of high-power motor cars, of aëroplanes even, flitted through his mind; but the speediest of them could not make three miles a minute. By changing from the freight to the down train, which came along within the half hour, Savage could reach Webster around half past four at the earliest. But he was here now—somewhere out in that vast crowd swarming around the track. At least, the pitcher had been positive of that until this mo-

ment; now his mind began to waver. He might have been mistaken by a chance resemblance—it was within the bounds of possibility. Through the thin partition before him the muffled shuffling of many feet and the rasping sound of many voices came to him from the betting shed. Then he realized that Warren was speaking:

"Hello! Hello! Are you on yet, Mr. Locke? Say, how the mischief do you happen to know anything about the escape? Bob ain't 'phoned you, has he?"

"N-o." The pitcher's face had suddenly become curiously altered. The lips were firm, the muscles of the jaw had hardened. "No, Joe," he repeated more briskly, "Bob didn't 'phone. I—thought I saw Savage in the crowd on the track just now, but of course that's—impossible. Yes, sure! I guess you'll pinch him all right. We'll be back by to-morrow noon, I reckon. Sure, we licked 'em—four to one. I've got to get back for the race. Good-by."

Returning to the box, Lefty found that order had at last been reëstablished, and that the first race was about to start. After all the preliminary excitement, the actual events seemed rather tame. The party sat through two of the races, then Miss Berkeley suggested that they drive back to the hotel to have an early dinner before the rush.

The southpaw was still unusually quiet, and

more than once Janet jokingly commented on his preoccupation. He laughed it off, but when they reached the hotel and the girls went to their rooms to dress for dinner, the thoughtful pucker flashed instantly back into his forehead.

"Well, suppose we improve the shining hour with a nip or two of bourbon," suggested Ted Berkeley. "I've got some good stuff in my bag. You'll join us, won't you, Locke?"

Lefty smilingly shook his head. "I can't. We have to keep pretty strict training, you know. I'll come along, though, and watch you punish it."

Berkeley, laughing, acquiesced, and led the way toward the elevators. Already the lobby was filled with a heterogeneous assemblage and as they pushed their way through Locke's roving eyes suddenly lit up at the sight of a figure moving along a cross corridor toward the side entrance.

With a hurried apology and a promise to come up later, he fairly flung himself in the direction the fellow had taken. Halfway down the corridor the young man glanced back, and, instead of stopping, jerked his hat over his eyes and sped on almost at a run. A moment later he became mixed up with an entering crowd. Before he could extricate himself, Lefty reached him and caught his shoulder.

"Hold up a minute, Savage!" he said quietly. "I want to talk to you."

With no reply save a defiant movement of his head, the busher turned and faced him. For a tense moment their glances clashed. Then Lefty broke the awkward pause.

"I know all about it," he said, in that same quiet, restrained tone. "Suppose we go up to my room and talk it over?"

Savage hesitated momentarily. Then, with a slight shrug of his shoulders, he followed Lefty back through the hallway. A few seconds later the metal gate of the elevator shaft clanged shut behind them.

CHAPTER XLI

REVELATIONS

THERE was a constant passing and repassing of people through the lobby, but not until after five did the advance guard of the Blue Stockings, consisting of Kennedy, Dalton, Gene Temple, and Ogan, appear. They came by the main entrance, laughing and joking, at the precise moment that a broad-shouldered young man, a soft hat pulled down over his eyes, turned from the register and put a question to the clerk.

"Tethridge?" the latter repeated briskly, turning for an instant to inspect the keyboard. "Why, he hasn't come—"

He stopped abruptly, with a sniff of surprise, for the young man, without a word of explanation, had whirled about, and was making swiftly for the side corridor. A second later the keen eyes of the Blue Stockings' manager sighted him; there was a gasp of astonishment, checked in its very birth. Then a shout:

"Savage! Grab him, Temple—don't let him get away!"

For a fraction of a second, Temple, who was

nearer the hurrying man than any of the others, seemed to hesitate. But another roar from Kennedy, accompanied by a forward rush, spurred him on, and, plunging through a throng of bewildered loungers, he grabbed the Westerner by one arm.

With a snarl like that of a trapped animal, Savage whirled on him. "Let go, you cheap sport!" he cried. "If you don't, I'll put the whole crowd wise to your crookedness—"

He did not finish, for at that moment Kennedy gripped the other arm, and, with characteristic presence of mind, shoved him through the door of an adjoining writing room, whence he was followed by the other members of his squad. Then the door slammed in the face of the crowd of curious spectators.

There was another door leading to a small reception room, but this Ogan promptly closed, taking his position in front of it. Kennedy released his hold on the busher, who stepped back against a table, his chin high, his eyes insolently returning the manager's steady, contemptuous stare.

"So you broke out?" the latter commented scornfully. "Nice one you are to talk about crookedness! Why, that's your middle name!"

Savage's eyes gleamed. "At least I never forged my father's name, like that man!" he retorted, with a vicious side glance at Temple's

flushed face. "Nor passed myself off for an amateur after I'd played professional ball all summer. Oh, you can't deny it! I know! Your old man didn't prosecute, but it's the truth, all the same. You didn't think to run up against me, I s'pose, after pitching two seasons as Fred Moore out on the coast, an' then trotting back East to pretend you were a sweet young innocent that didn't even know fellows got money for playing ball."

Temple's face was flaming now, and his eyes were filled with a mixture of bitter shame and indignation.

"That's nothing to what I've got on you!" he retorted. "It's past and gone now." His eyes swept pleadingly from one face to another. "I had to earn money to get through, and pitching was the only trade I knew. The rules of professional athletics are unjust, anyhow. Fellows do other things for money to help them along in college—waiting, dishwashing, tutoring, coaching—why shouldn't they play ball? The check was a heap worse, but it was that or starve. Since my father forgave me, I don't see it's anybody else's business."

He caught his breath, and his eyes returned to Savage's sneering face.

"You're a corker to bring up things like this!" he went on bitterly. "I was in the grandstand

the day you pitched against the Atlanta Tigers. Oh, I know you didn't see me! I was spread out flat, taking things easy. But I saw *you*—through a crack in the floor. It was a nice, wide crack, too, that gave me a fine view of the dressing room underneath. I saw everything that went on there. I know the game you've been playing, and when I've told Kennedy he'll—"

"Great—cats!" The exclamation came in a gasping gurgle from the lips of Al Ogan. "Am I seeing things?"

The door had opened and closed. Two men stood with their backs against it. One was Lefty Locke. The other so resembled in every detail—save expression alone—the sneering busher leaning against the table that the result was petrifying.

A tense silence fell upon the room as the dazed occupants stared with widening eyes and sagging jaws at this apparent miracle. It was the face of the manager which changed first. His gaze had been shifting continually from Savage to the newcomer, and back again. Presently the dark, heavy brows lowered in a scowl.

"So there's two of you!" he snapped.

A bitter smile flitted across Locke's lips. "A pretty dual personality, Jack," he said quietly. "This has certainly been one on me, all right."

The newcomer took a step forward, his face serious.

"I know you'll be furious, Kennedy," he said slowly. "You certainly have a right to be, but I—"

"Hold on, there!" The manager's voice was harsh and angry. "You say you know all about this game," he went on, glaring at Temple. "Suppose you spin out the rest of that story."

Temple flushed and dropped his eyes. Apparently he would have much preferred remaining in the background.

"There—isn't—much more," he stammered. "I'd dozed off, and when I came to I heard some one moving around down below. It was Savage, and I was some surprised that he wasn't out on the field. Once he went outside for a minute or two, and a little while afterward the other one came in."

"Other one!" ejaculated Kennedy. "You knew there were two, then?"

Temple nodded. "I knew Neil here"—he glanced at the scowling fellow by the table—"had a brother, Nelson, who was a lot better pitcher, and when I found him passing under Nelson's name I guessed there was something queer about it."

"But you kept your mouth shut because of what he knew about you," growled the manager. "Go on."

"I hadn't any idea they were so much alike.

When I saw them together in the dressing room under the stand I was stunned for a minute. I gathered from their talk that they had planned to make a shift that night, but Neil was half full, and insisted on going out then to finish the game. Said if Nels didn't agree he'd go out anyhow. So he got his way. They changed clothes, and Nels went out through the gate in the fence, while the other walked out on the field. That's all, I think."

"All!" Kennedy repeated harshly. "I should hope so!" He turned to Nelson Savage with a heavy scowl. "You're the one I hired, ain't you?" he snapped. "I thought so. You deliberately turned my offer over to this miserable brother of yours, didn't you? Well, what did you do it for? You must have known what he was. What was the game?"

Nelson Savage winced a little, clenching his hands tightly behind his back.

"I did it because I wanted him to have one more chance," he explained, in a low tone. "He'd been going to the bad for a long time, but he can pitch when he's right. I hoped a chance like that, and being down here in training where he couldn't drink, would make him pull up. I even gave up baseball myself, much as I hated to, and accepted an offer to go on the road for a sporting-goods house."

He hesitated an instant, and caught his lip between his teeth. "It wasn't any use. When I came down through the State, I stopped off to—see a friend, and also to learn how he was making out. I discovered that Neil had got in with a shark named Tethridge, who was training some race horses over at Livermore's place, across from Tulane. He'd evidently been supplying my brother with liquor, for when I slipped over there I found Neil so intoxicated he could hardly move. He was as bad next morning, and there was nothing to do but take his place until he could sober up. He seemed perfectly content to lie around doing nothing, but finally I simply had to cut out and attend to work or lose my job. So I looked him up, and told him he'd have to come back. I'd planned to make the shift after the game, but—well, you've heard about that. I know what a poor trick it was to play on you, Kennedy, but I was trying to save my brother. If I can ever make it up to you in any way at all, I'll be mighty glad."

During the recital, to which the others listened with absorbed interest, Neil Savage had preserved his attitude of sneering composure, unmoved. Now he straightened languidly, and yawned.

"Now that the Sunday school sentiments have all been expressed," he drawled insolently, "I

don't suppose there's any particular use of my hanging around."

For a second Kennedy did not answer. He was looking at the other brother, and the expression of appeal in Nelson's eyes would have moved a much harder-hearted person than old Jack.

"All right; you can beat it," he said shortly. "I might suggest that in the future Georgia would be a good State for you to avoid."

"Thanks for the advice," was the nonchalant reply. "I had the same notion myself."

Without further comment, glancing neither to right nor left, he moved toward the door. Lefty stood aside to let him pass, his look eloquently expressing the indignation which was consuming him. Nelson Savage, his eyes fixed rather wistfully on his brother, took an impulsive step forward as Neil passed, and then drew back, his face white. The door opened and closed with a slam which had in it a sense of finality as absolute as the word at the end of a tale. The pause that followed was broken by Kennedy.

"You're a fool, young man," he said, "to monkey with a brother like that; but I reckon you've had your lesson. You can pitch, and I believe you can make good in professional baseball. Mebbe, after this, you won't care to tie up with me, but perhaps I can get you a try-out with Ben Frazer, manager of the Wolves. He's got a catcher, Brick

King, that he's been trying to trade for a twirler, but I don't want any of his lemons. Still," he added, "everything considered, I ought to have first shot at you. If you've got a full line of the goods I've seen a few samples of, I might give you a chance to put your John Hancock to a Blue Stocking contract. Would you?"

Savage's face lightened. "Would I?" he cried. "Just give me that chance!"

With the departure of Neil Savage, happening to glance toward the door of the small reception room, Lefty was surprised to see it ajar, and, standing in the opening, the figures of Janet and Celia.

How long they had been there he did not know, but without delay he walked swiftly over. Miss Berkeley's face was serious; the gray eyes, fixed so intently on Savage, held a glint of tears in them. She did not speak or even turn her head when the southpaw, his expression somewhat stern and accusing, drew Janet back into the other room.

"You knew all the time," Lefty said briefly, his brows drawn down in a frown.

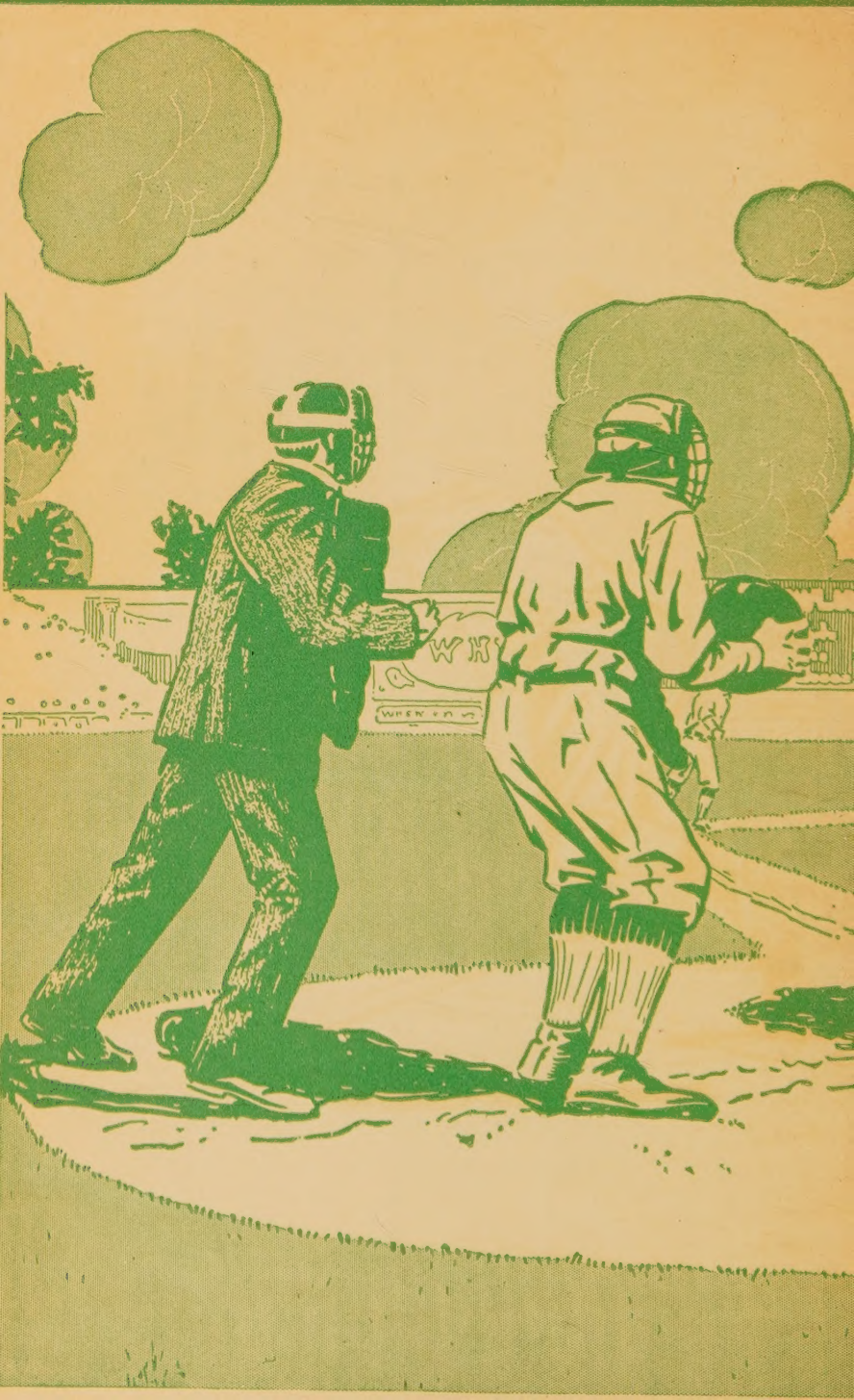
She put one hand lightly on his arm, and raised her anxious, questioning eyes. "Celia told me about it," she explained hastily, "but made me promise never to breathe a single word—even to you. Surely you won't blame me for keeping that promise?"

For a second the frown struggled for existence before it was swept away by the light which illumined Lefty's whole face.

"Perhaps I'll forgive you—if—"

His hand had found hers. He bent nearer, looking into the depths of those wonderful violet eyes. His voice sank to a murmur, so low that no third person could possibly have heard and understood.

THE END



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